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Street Dust

and

Other Stories

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By Ouida

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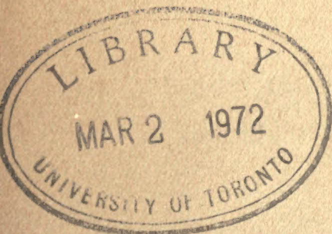

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Street Dust

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Their mother was dead.

She had lived only thirty years, and a few months; but she had died before her time, as so many do, of over-toil and little food, some days no food at all, only grass seeds and leaves of wild sage. She was dead; a mere skeleton, brown and dry as a mummy, lying on her bed of dry ferns, from which swarms of lice and fleas were hurrying in their knowledge of and horror of a lifeless thing; only the torpid flies remained, gathering together in black dots upon her as the day advanced.

Her two children, who had seen her die, and had exhausted themselves in shrieks and sobs, went up to her again and kissed her and pressed their heads against her body. But there was no warmth, no response.

"She must be dead—dead—dead," said the elder of them; and then they fell again to weeping, and they screamed loudly and long. But the echoes of their screams were the only answer that they had.

The day was now bright, and the great grass plains were hushed in their morning calm. A little greenfinch was hopping to and fro on a slab of broken marble, pecking at some seed or insect invisible to any eyes except his own: the small bird was the only living thing near.

The woman had come there three years earlier. She had been the wife or leman of a shepherd who had had some share, through his revelations, in the capture of a noted brigand whose head-quarters had been at Palombaro. For that share the shepherd had been quieted for ever, by a dagger stroke between the shoulders, one evening as he took his flocks to drink at the Anio water.

Life in Palombaro was no longer safe or possible for the family known to belong to him. She left the town stealthily and in terror, carrying with her a new-born male child, whilst her two elder children toiled after her as best they could, carry-ing a few cooking vessels and a bundle of clothes. She went on and on, on and on, down into the Campagna and across

it to the south, resting as she could under thickets or amongst buried tombs, scarcely knowing what she did for the grief which was within her for her murdered love, and the torturing knowledge that he had deserved his end, having been a traitor, or at best a tell-tale: there is no other crime so dark in these parts as to speak of things which are hidden, and to aid the law against an outlaw.

For some time she dared not show herself by daylight, but at last she found a deserted hut built up out of rushes and brackens by the side of some blocks of tufa, once portions of a tomb; and here, finding herself left undisturbed, she ventured to remain with her two elder children; the little male had died of

exposure and fevered milk in the earliest days of her flight. In this hut, under the Mons Sacer, she dwelt three years, getting a few coins by gathering the flowers of the plains and taking them to Rome, which was within sight at a few miles' distance; this she did from the beginning of winter until the beginning of summer; in summer there were no buyers in the city, and there was no one on the plains except a very few, widely scattered, fever-stricken peasants as miserable as herself.

The children, to whom she gave almost all she could get to eat, did not suffer greatly; but she did. From a stout, strong, bright-eyed, red-cheeked woman, she became a mere skeleton, hectic, parched, always thirsty,

always racked by a deep-set painful cough and rheumatic pangs. She went into the city, with the flowers which the children gathered, all through a fourth winter; and then in the great heats took to her bed, such as it was, and could do no more; the malarial disease had seized her. It was now the beginning of another winter; and she lay dead on the dead ferns, and the sense of death stole like the cold of the air into the two children, who were now alone on earth.

They were aged now twelve and ten years respectively; they were called Prisca and Petronilla. But for their squalor, their fleshlessness, and their sunburnt, unwashed skins, they would have been handsome children, and their eyes were large, and, when they were

not filled with tears, glowed like the lamps lit before shrines and tabernacles in old mediæval streets. They had loved their mother with that selfish, unconscious love which is all that good mothers usually receive. She had been their all; she had been like a divinity to them, bringing them all the nourishment and succour that they ever got. Sometimes they had gone with her into the city, but usually she had left them in the hut, for the way was long, and the stress in the streets dangerous; and then how they had watched for her as the sun went down behind the great dome, which afar off rose dark on the horizon! How they had run to meet her! How happy they had been when they had seen her returning over the

turf in the late evening light—a poor, ragged, dusty, wayworn figure, but to them so dear, such a harbinger of food, of joy, of safety! For when they were alone they were afraid.

And now they were alone for ever: some vague sense of that immense, irremediable loss, that life-long solitude, weighed on their ignorance. They had seen their father brought home dead, a dark red wound gaping between his brown shoulder blades; but then their mother had remained, they had not been alone. No one would come ever now to them, they knew; no one ever came there. No one probably even knew that there were human creatures under that wattle cone beneath the tufa ruin. Once they had seen some horses

and riders pass within sight, going at full stride over the grass: their mother had told them it was the Roman hunt, and bade them mark the pretty piebald and skewbald-coated hounds plunging amongst the brushwood; but that was all, and was two winters past. She had hidden herself and them with care, and had never lighted a fire of brambles on the floor of the beaten earth, except when night had fallen, and the white smoke could not be seen.

They mourned, and wailed, beside her all that day, and all the following night, and, as the sun rose on the second day, Prisca, who was the elder, said to her sister:—

"There is nothing to eat."

They had finished the one half-loaf of

black bread and the remains of cold maize porridge: there was nothing more.

Petronilla only sobbed.

"It is bad not to eat," said Prisca.

"It is bad," moaned Petronilla, as she rocked herself to and fro on the floor. She was not intelligent; she was the mere echo of her sister.

"We must go and gather flowers," said Prisca; but her eyes rested wistfully on the dead body. They could not gather flowers, and go and sell them, without leaving their dead mother.

Prisca knew enough of death to know that the dead could not be hurt by solitude or neglect; but still she could not bear the thought of leaving that corpse all by itself in the lonely hut, with the torpid flies creeping at will over it, and the dull

grey and black hues of corruption stealing farther and farther upon it. But she was hungry, and Petronilla was more hungry still, and there was nothing in the hut—not a crust, not a crumb.

"We must go," she said; and she took the osier baskets, and the knives, and gave one of each to her sister. She looked back at their mother as she lay on the bed of leaves; some idea that she must be put in the earth, somehow, somewhere, crossed her mind, but it was vague, indefinite, she did not pursue the thought. No one would touch the body until they returned, for none knew that the hut was inhabited. No one had ever been there, except those huntsmen; and, sometimes, black against the light, the distant form of a shepherd or a mounted buffalo driver.

"Come," she said to Petronilla; "if we wait, the sun will fade the flowers."

It was earliest morning, and cold. The deep rose and crimson of a November sunrise glowed in the south-east. Heavy white dews soaked the grass. Far away on the hills church bells were ringing; they sounded sweet, faint, unearthly.

They noticed none of these things: their eyes were blind with tears as they closed the rickety wooden door of the hut.

"We must make haste," said Prisca. "It is late."

"It is late," said Petronilla.

They knew all the places where flowers dwelt in the greatest numbers. The hut stood amongst thickets of oleanders and cistus, a little stream ran through it; the hellebores were already plentiful, both

black and green; there were still some saffron-coloured dragon's-mouth, some ox-eyed daisies, some pale rosy cyclamen along the mossy course of the spring. There were still also many fronds of maiden's-hair and hart's tongue. Perhaps the spot had been some great Roman's garden twenty centuries earlier, for there were some bushes of autumn roses, still in flower, such roses as Horace gathered and loved.

They selected and cut the blooms with judgment, for they had been taught by their mother to do so, and not to waste or take more than they needed at one time; then they sorted them into little bunches, with a fringe of ferns to each, and tied them up with dry blades of the longest grass. That done, they arranged

them in their baskets, and looked towards Rome.

"It is a long, long way," said Prisca.

"A long way," echoed Petronilla; her mouth quivered, her tears rolled down her thin brown cheeks. She was the younger: her mother and Prisca had always spared her as much as was possible, and filled her little stomach if their own had gone empty.

"It is a long way, but we must go," said Prisca, and she turned and looked wistfully at the hut beyond the oleander and cistus thicket.

Her heart was heavy, and her fears were great. The plain before her looked so wide, the city seemed so far distant. It hurt her, too, so much to leave that poor corpse there all alone. If a fox or a wild

hog should break in and gnaw it? A wolf, too, might come down from the hills; she had never seen one, but her mother had, once, as she had returned home in a snowstorm.

But there is no help for it, she said to herself; hunger was gnawing her like a hundred wolves, and her mother would have told her to get food for Petronilla before all things; so she set her face towards Rome, taking the child's hand in hers; their naked feet were blue and half frozen as they trod on the turf so cold and drenched with its frosty dews.

But they had both of them known only hardship from their birth, and were used to the extremes alike of heat and of cold, and every mile they covered brought the sun higher above the

mountains, and diminished the pinching chill of the air, although snow was lying deep on the summits of the Sabines.

Once, when they passed by a flock of sheep which was beginning to graze, one of the shepherds, who had left children of his own under the clouds on the breast of Soracte, gave them some skim milk and bread, and let them warm themselves by a fire he had made on a slab of nenfro, from broken boughs and dead reeds and rushes.

"You are taking these weeds into Rome," he said to them. "You may get into trouble. In the old time we sold anything we chose; anything we found; coins, stones, chips of carvings, skins, whatever we liked. But nowadays,

—one of my boys went yonder with a pair of our buffalo horns, and he was taken up for hawking without a licence in the streets. Take care they do not pull you up for your little flowers."

But Prisca did not understand what he meant.

"Mother always sold them," she said.

"And where is your mother now?" asked the shepherd.

"She is dead in the hut," said Prisca.

"Poor soul!" said the shepherd.

They dared not stay long in the pleasant heat from the blazing boughs, for it was already nearly noon. They measured the time by the sun. They went on their way, bolder, and less wretched, now that their hunger was appeased and the air less biting in its cold.

In another hour and a half they had passed the Nomentano bridge, and were at the Porta Pia, where the guards were so busy with the traffic that the children slipped through the bustle and pressure unseen, and entered the city without being questioned.

They had not been there very often with their mother, not often enough to know the streets well; and the rush of the pedallists and the automobilists, the whizz and shriek of the electric trams, the shouts of the vendors of newspapers and programmes, the many vile, ear-splitting sounds which rage in every city, where the bark of a dog or the shout of children at play is thought terrible, frightened them, for they had no longer their mother's skirt to cling to, and their

mother's voice to reassure them with its smiling chiding of their cowardice. "*Vieni vieni! C'e niente!*"

"She would never speak any more!" thought Prisca; and she saw the colours and movement of the streets through heavy tears, ever renewing as she brushed them from her lashes.

She would never speak any more. Oh, cruel problem of arrested life, too hard for such young scholars, too brutal for even those who are aged in life's study!

They had entered Rome by the Porta Pia, walking onward by instinct rather than by sight. They had passed through the modern quarter of Macao, with its wretched imitations of South Kensington and Bayswater, and had wandered towards the centre of the city and the

Corso. The sky was cloudy; there was fog, due to the factories and railways, in the city, and an icy, drizzling rain had fallen an hour earlier, so that the granite flags were moist and muddy, and horses slipped and fell under men's lashes and curses.

They were two poor little tatter-demalions with their petticoats up to their knees, and their thick auburn hair curling rough and tangled over their shoulders, and their bare wet feet, growing colder on the stones of the pavement than on the frosty grass of the Campagna. But they were not conscious of their own unlikeness to the people around them; they had been too used to misery to feel any strangeness in it. Nor did the city daunt them in any way; their minds

were too empty for comparison, too innocent for envy. The noise alone intimidated and bewildered them; at their hut, under the tufa blocks and the oleander shrubs, there had been no noise, except the ripple of the water spring, and the cries of birds and of field mice.

Petronilla wanted to look at the wonderful shops, so full of glitter and riches; she had already forgotten her mother; she was still sorely frightened; but the magical colour and glitter of the long, narrow, rich, thronged street fascinated her.

"*O bello!*" she murmured at every step, "*O bello!*"

Prisca dragged her angrily onward.

"We shall never get back to-night," she said in anguish, for to leave her

mother alone all the night was more appalling to her than were any terrors or needs for herself.

As yet they had sold nothing; had not even had the courage to arrest and accost even one of these people so different to themselves, so wholly unlike the poor shepherds and peasants, who were all they had ever seen. Their mother had always stopped, and lifted up her basket, and said some imploring words whenever she had seen a person who had a kind face, or a carriage with children in it, stopping before a shop door. But, without her, Prisca felt as if she should never have the courage to ask for a centième; the great rush and babble and pressure of the long street bewildered her. Yet, if they sold nothing, what use was it to have come there?

What would they have to take back with them to keep them for a few days?

She, who was sensible of the danger in which they now were, of dying of hunger, pressed Petronilla close to her, clutching the child's arm, and dragged her towards a shop filled with flowers, such flowers as she had never seen; orchids, scarlet and gold and white, roses of every hue and size, snowy sceptres of tube-roses, and all the forced blossoms of hot-house and palm-house, with lotus and lilies, and small fountains playing over beds of moss.

"Would you buy them?" she said, timidly, and she uncovered her basket.

One of the men in the shop pushed her out on to the pavement.

"Do not come here with your dead weeds, dirtying and dripping on our floor,"

he said, angrily. What were the humble, wild things to him, either the children or the flowers?

Were the wild flowers dead? wondered Prisca: she looked at them in fear. They were faded, for the sun had been strong on the Campagna, and here in the streets it was cold and dark, and she had forgotten to cover them. The grief on her face as she saw this and stumbled out from the florist's doorway, was so extreme and pitiful that a lady, descending from a carriage, was touched by it.

"Poor little girls!" she said softly, and she opened her purse and gave Prisca a franc, and then entered the flower-shops without looking longer at them. The eyes of both the children glowed with wonder and rapture; they knew the worth of

money from its appearance, and a franc to them was wealth!

"Begging?" said a rough voice in their rear, and a hard hand clutched hold of Prisca's shoulder, whilst the fingers of another hand snatched the little paper note. Two communal guards were passing down the Corso.

"I did not beg, she gave it me!" screamed Prisca; and instinctively she clasped her sister in her arms, and the basket rolled down on the pavement.

"You have no licence!" said the guard, holding her tight. They did not even know what he meant.

"Take them to the Questura," said the elder guard. "They are little filthy brats. I saw them yesterday on the Pincio, importuning strangers."

"Mother died yesterday!" shrieked Prisca. "We were with her. Give me the money. I will go back——"

But the guards did not even listen to her, and the lady, who might perhaps have interfered and rescued them, did not notice the scene; she was busied in ordering the floral decorations for a ball which she was about to give. Several persons passing at the time saw, and were sorry, as they felt when they saw a dog snared by the dog snatchers, but no one of them dared to intervene; to stop the police in their holy missions is apt to bring the rash and meddlesome citizen who does so into equal misery with those he pities.

Their capture was the work of a moment, and their hands were tied, and their helpless bodies were pushed and kicked into a bye-street.

"Mother! mother! mother!" they screamed together, as though the poor discoloured body lying on its bed of leaves could hear and rise.

An aged priest, with white hair and a thin frayed cossack, coming out of a doorway, asked shyly and with hesitation what they had done.

"Begging, and annoying carriage people," said their captor, shortly and sullenly.

"They are very young and very poor," said the old priest wistfully.

"Your reverence had better not get into trouble," said the guard with significance, and he pushed the children on before him. "The streets must be cleared of these vermin," he added, arrogantly. "Our orders are positive."

As he spoke he struck the children on

their shoulders with the flat of his scabbard, partly to show his contempt for the Church, partly to show the public the omnipotence of the police. The blows resounded harshly on their fleshless bones, and their screams woke the echoes of the bye street; but, although various faces showed themselves at the windows and doors of the poor houses of the alley, no one ventured openly to resist.

Ever and again a municipal guard is found, stabbed to the heart in a deserted lane; a carabineer is discovered, shot dead in a wood or a park; or the drowned body of one of the Questura is seen amongst the osiers of a swollen river, which has thrown it up with other flotsam and jetsam after an autumn or winter storm. That is the only

vengeance open to the people for a life-long tyranny. Is the blame theirs if they take it?

Prisca and Petronilla, under the grip of the guard's hand, and the dread of his scabbard's blows, stumbled along blindly, holding their breath, ceasing their shrieks, knowing no more whither they went, or what would be their fate, than a poor puppy knows of his destiny when he is hauled along by a cord round his neck. Rain began to fall, and wetted their uncovered heads, and made their ragged clothing cling to them damp and cold. The guard swore at them because the rain-drops soaked through his collar and tickled his throat, and he pushed them onward in greater haste until they reached the police-station; and there,

without more explanation or any compassion, they were thrown into the lock-up where such offenders are consigned: harmless old vagrants, and young children, pell mell with thieves and felons of all kinds, cast down much as the dust of the streets is shot by scavengers on to a refuse-heap.

They were wet through, and trembled from head to foot, but they were dumb from sheer terror; no one noticed them; they were left in a corner on the flags, fierce, unknown faces, and haggard, repulsive figures around them.

Petronilla crept into her sister's arms, and thus, with their hair tangled together, and their heads against the wall, they remained, scarcely daring to breathe, never daring to speak, even to one another.

The thoughts of Prisca, so far as she thought at all, were of the dead body lying all alone in the hut.

Petronilla could not think at all; her senses were all stupefied with fear. She clung to her elder by instinct alone: Prisca had always put her first, and saved her from all harm.

They were left in their corner undisturbed, but unsuccoured. There were many sounds around them, and from the corridor behind the cell; tramp of feet, clink of handcuffs, loud voices which commanded, stifled voices which cursed and protested; noises, too, from the street without, of traffic and cries, and now and then the shriek of a dog being lassoed, or the crash of a horse falling on the stones.

At various times the guards entered; one by one, most of those arrested were led out; the day passed; the night fell. There was no light except a glimmer from a gas jet in the passage beyond, which came through a square unglazed grating into the cell. Three persons alone remained there beside the children: one a very old woman taken up for begging, the second a youth who had been hawking wares without a licence, and the third a pickpocket. The old woman told her beads and muttered over them incessantly; the youth sobbed and swore, and cursed the parents who had given him birth, and the hawker who had tricked him into buying the wares; the pickpocket swore himself off to sleep, being familiar with his situation, and

knowing that either resistance or repining was useless. No one spoke to the children, who, indeed, looked no more than a bundle of rags huddled up in their dark corner.

Once the youth got up and awakened the pickpocket, arousing a volley of dreadful oaths.

"Shall we be here all night?" he asked tremulously.

"Certain sure," said the thief.

"With nothing to eat?"

The thief turned on his side, and resumed his slumbers, not answering so foolish a question.

Prisca, whose ears had caught the word "eat," listened where she lay in the torpor of her terror; if only she could get some bread for her sister!

But when silence alone answered the youth's question, she understood. There was no hope of any food that night.

"Oh, mother, dear mother!" she wailed aloud. She could not believe that their mother could be deaf to their prayers. Her body was dead and cold—yes—but *she* must be somewhere.

The old woman looked towards the corner where the children lay, and stopped her aves for a moment; then shook her head and went on again, telling her beads She had enough to do to think of herself. She had a sick son, and seven grandchildren, at home in her cellar; they were all waiting for her, and for what they would expect her to take home to them. She could not busy her brains with others, though

a meagre pang of fellow feeling ran through her slow veins for a moment. If she had had anything to give the children in the corner, yonder, she would have given it, but she had nothing.

The night grew darker; at times a key grated in the lock, and the bolts were pushed back, and guards entered, again and again, and held up over them a petroleum lamp to make sure that those detained were there. Their visit made, they withdrew, leaving the blackness of night behind them. There was not even a glimmer of the gas jet in the corridor, for that light had been put out early.

As the hours went on the youth sobbed himself to sleep, the pickpocket snored, the old woman ceased to mutter her prayers, and fell asleep with her head

upon her breast; the children could not sleep; their clothes had dried on them, stiff and miserable; their bones achèd in every joint; fever had come upon them, with its chills, its heats, its tremors, its aching throats; they thought they were only hungry and unhappy, but they were very ill. The time passed for them in a dull, stupid suffering, varied by paroxysms in which they screamed aloud. In one of these the pickpocket flung one of his boots at them, with a curse, through the dark, and then the other. The latter struck Prisca on the head. The old woman, awaking dimly to what was passing, thought she was at home in her cellar: "Don't hit the babes, Beppo," she murmured drowsily, believing that she spoke to her son.

"I will slit their pipes if they are not quiet," said the thief.

He forgot that his knife had been taken away from him on his entrance there.

Prisca, however, understood the sense of his threat, as she leaned against the wall, and her heavy eyes dilated, and she drew her little sister still closer to her with a maternal gesture of protection. She did not let herself sleep again, and she succeeded in hushing Petronilla into unconsciousness and rest. So the black night wore away.

In the grey, dull light which came with morning from the corridor, the filthy figure of the old woman, huddled in her rags, the stupid, scared face of the youth, the brutalized countenance and stinking clothes of the thief, the dirty floor of the

cell, and its bare, grim walls, gained a still more hideous aspect. Neither of the children dared look up: they cowed down one against the other, hiding their eyes; they still believed that in some way or another their mother would arise and come to their aid. One by one the guards took out the three others, and no one of them returned. The door was locked and bolted; the window strongly grated; vague ideas of escape crossed Prisca's mind, indistinctly stirring under the lethargy of her fear and stupor. But she had consciousness enough left to see that it would be impossible.

"They will forget us, and we shall die," she thought; it did not seem to matter. If only the gaolers would give her sister something to eat!

Petronilla was always murmuring: "Mother, mother! Where is the bread?" For their mother, going without often herself, had always given them a good hunch of bread on their awaking.

It was late in the forenoon when those who had come for the others came for them.

"Get up!" said the guard, and he pushed them with his foot.

Prisca, trembling, tried to obey, but her body and limbs felt stiff as stakes, and yet empty.

Petronilla continued to cry, "Mother—bread!" as a hungry fledgeling in a deserted nest cries for his slain parents, and his lost food, whilst the bird-slaughterers stride on, indifferent, through the grass and the blossoms of spring.

The man pulled them both up from the floor with rude hands.

"Go on, or it will be bad for you," he said; "there is no use in shamming here."

Prisca tried to obey, for she had sense enough to know that they would only fare worse the more they resisted. Her feet were numbed, and her sinews seemed frozen, but she managed to lift up Petronilla, and, half dragging and half carrying her, went out of the cell before the guard, who held their hair, to keep close hold on them, and every now and then gave it a rough jerk, as a bad driver tugs at a curb.

They were taken before the police authorities to receive warrant and order for their consignment to prison. The

provisional preliminary imprisonment punishes equally with the guilty those innocent who on their trial are set free. The Commissary of police had, without investigation, consigned the other three to gaol on the unattested declaration of the guards, the old woman being sentenced because she could not pay a fine.

When the two children were brought before him, the Commissary looked at them with a vague pity: they were two such miserable atoms to be offenders against the law. But he listened to the deposition of the guards, who declared that they had seen these two little vagrants annoying people on the pavement and in carriages, and had also seen them beg for and obtain money. When asked their names and residence, they had been

obstinately mute; they had been taken up at three o'clock in the previous afternoon; they were old and incorrigible offenders, well known to the police for their contumacy: so at least said their accusers.

"They are very young," said the Commissary, "but if they be contumacious——"

Then he questioned them.

"Where do you live?"

"In the hut," said Prisca, feebly.

"Where is your mother?"

"In the hut."

"Where is this hut?"

Prisca did not answer; she did not know.

"Your names and ages?" he continued.

Prisca did not reply.

"Find the mother," said the Commissary

to the guard; "she is more to blame than they."

"Where is your mother?" said the guard, and shook Prisca by the shoulders.

"Dead—dead," said the child.

"But if she be in the hut?"

"She is in the hut."

"And where is that?"

Prisca made a vague gesture which implied immeasurable distance.

"They are imbecile," said the Commissary, "or they are feigning idiocy. They are very small, very miserable. Send them out of the city. They come, it is plain to see, from the Campagna."

There were scores of similar children in the prisons and penitentiaries since the recent laws against vagrancy had been set in motion. He felt unwilling to add

these miserable little creatures to the number.

"You may go," he said to them; "I will not send you before the tribunal this time. But if you be found again in Rome no mercy will be shown you."

"He lacks zeal," thought a brigadier standing behind his chair, and he meditated a secret report against his too supine chief.

"Take them away. Put them in the street," said that gentleman with impatience; he felt sorry for these little, lonely, stupid waifs, and he dared not show it for fear of the argus-eyed officials and underlings around him; he would have given them some small coins, but he dared not encourage mendicancy with all these chartered spies around him.

The children were pushed outside the room, down several passages, and finally thrust through the entrance doorway into the open air. There the guard gave each a shake and a slap.

"Get out of the city, little beasts, and keep out of it," he said, as his valediction.

Prisca understood that they were free. Petronilla understood nothing, except that she ached all over, and wanted to eat and drink. It was twenty-four hours since they had received the charity of the shepherd on the plains.

Prisca did not know where she was: there were the babble, the bustle, the noise of the streets around her, and she did not know when, or where, these stony ways and long lines of walls would cease. Her little sister was like a log to drag

along; the child scarcely moved, scarcely aided herself in any way, and Prisca felt her own limbs quivering under her, and the chills and heats of fever coursing turn by turn through her veins.

They had come in by a gate, by a barrier, they must go out by one: that was all which was clear to her; that the gates and barriers might lead to totally different points of the compass was wholly beyond the grasp of her mind in its actual state.

Now, she had entered by the Porta Pia; but the Questura, from which she had been expelled, was in the Via di Arancio, to the west of the Corso, and it was into an alley out of this street that they were turned adrift, knowing less than a lost dog where to turn or what to do. But haunted by the command which had sunk

into her dulled brain to get out of the city at once, or be hauled back to prison, Prisca, trembling in every limb, ventured to stop by an old man selling chestnuts, and to say under her breath, "The gate! Where is the gate?"

"What gate?" he asked.

"The gate!" she repeated.

He pointed upward towards the left.

"The Porta del Popolo is yonder. Is that the one you want? Or is it the Salara?" said the old man, who was patient and kind.

"No," said Prisca; then, searching in her aching, puzzled brain, she added, "ours is Por' Pia."

"That lies the other way. You must go towards the Quirinal," said the chestnut seller, and patiently pointed out

where they should go; and then, neglecting his smoking stove, seeing Prisca's face so wan and blue and scared, he offered her a handful of his chestnuts. "For nothing, for nothing; take them, little ones," he said good-naturedly.

But she dared not take them; the terror of another accusation and another arrest was on her. She dragged her sister away from the stall, and went on up the street, the child screaming and resisting. He had explained to her the way across the maze of streets to Porta Pia, clearly enough for any one who had known anything of Rome to find the way. But Prisca only gathered a confused sense of some vast wilderness stretching between her and the homeward road.

The distance is not very great from the Corso to the Porta Pia to those who are driving in carriages or walking gaily along on pleasant errands. But she could not disentangle the network of the streets, and she went instead, without knowing what she did, towards the Tiber; taking, by instinct, secluded and silent ways instead of the thoroughfares, where the traffic bewildered her more and more. She was footsore and fever-stricken, and the child hung on her like a leaden weight. Her sole means of making a few pence had been taken from her, and the lady's gift also. In her dull, aching brain a sense of the injustice done to her seemed to burn her like a fire.

What a quantity of bread that lira would have bought! Why had the guard

kept it? Petronilla was crying and moaning with hunger. She herself could not have eaten if all the shops and inns of Rome had been open to her; but Petronilla!—Prisca felt as if she sinned against her mother, sinned against the Madonna, in letting the child want.

She dragged her frozen feet along over the stones in a belief that she was going towards Porta Pia and the open country, but in reality she had turned away from it; she often went over the same ground again and again, in circles, like a child lost in a forest, and she was always farther and farther from her goal. At last she came on a wholly deserted street: one of those marked for demolition. The dwellers in it had been turned out, the houses were shut up; there was even a

church which was closed, as it was to be swept away in a few weeks. It had a noble doorway rising above some wide, low steps; the portico and pillars were of travertine marble; the sculptured Ecce Homo above it was of fine fifteenth-century work; a dealer in such things had already bought it for a foreign patron; the door itself was of oak, finely carved in panels which represented the life of St. Jerome, to whom the church was dedicated.

Prisca saw its broad, smooth, easy steps at the moment when Petronilla sank out of her grasp on to the stones, and she herself felt that she could move no more. With one last effort she carried her sister on to the steps, and dragged her upward until they each leaned against the door.

The portico sheltered them in a measure from the blasts of a keen wind blowing from the north, which drove down the doomed street clouds of grey dust from portions of it already dismantled.

No one came thither. The workmen were making holiday, for it was the vigil of the Presentation of the Virgin; now and then the wind shook a loose shutter, or dislodged some loosened bricks; nothing else moved. A sleep, which was mere stupor, stole over Prisca; she thought her sister already slept, for the child's head grew heavier and heavier upon her breast. The hours passed; no one came there; delirious fancies passed across Prisca's mind. She saw her mother and the Madonna, hand in hand, come through the oleander shrubs beside the

hut; but they frowned on her and said, "Hast thou let the child starve?"

Then she cried out aloud, and tried to lift up Petronilla's head, but she could not; it was heavy as a stone.

Then she ceased to dream, and ceased to feel; her eyelids shut out the day, her breath was feeble and fluttering like a half-frozen bird; her last act was to draw her little sister's curls about her own throat.

"Mother — mother will know," she thought; and then she, too, was still, like the child upon her knees.

They remained there all the day, and all the night, locked in each other's arms.

In the morning some scavengers found them, sitting thus. They had been dead many hours.

They were taken to the mortuary house, and thence, none recognizing them, they were carried to the common ditch in which the poor and nameless lie.

What were they more than the dust of the street, blown about a little while by the winds, and then swept away and forgotten?

Letta

Letta

They were going home from a fair: one of those autumn fairs to which peasants flock from far and wide. They were driving home some young cattle. They were all a little hot with wine. There were eight of them, of ages varying between sixteen and twenty-two; dwellers on farms which were scattered along a valley, under the shadow of mountain spurs of the lower and central Apennines; all of them were cousins, neighbours, friends, who had known each other from childhood. They had difficulty with their cattle, being strangers to them, and the poor beasts being weary, jaded,

thirsty, and footsore, and trying to go back to the country which they knew.

The young men blamed each other for the trouble they had; they grew hot and rough; they used shrill, sharp words and angry oaths; each accused the others. The animals grew wilder, and six of them broke from the men, and galloped away into the twilight, which was brief and dark. Then the curses and the reproaches grew louder and more general; and the youngsters set on each other furiously, the elder accusing the younger, the boys protesting their innocence. In the evening air there was a great uproar, and the young bulls bellowed to get free, and the cows lowed loudly for the calves left far behind. Then the youths used their sticks on one another,

and three of them drew their knives, and no one knew clearly how, or by whom, but one of them was stabbed in three places, and fell dead, and another was struck in the groin, and the sight of the blood sobered the rest.

They all went homewards silent and afraid, every one denying that he had struck the fatal blows. The wounded man they carried with them; the dead one they left under a juniper tree. He was stone dead, he would not get away; his people would come for him with an ox-cart in the morning.

When they reached the first farmstead, several of the cattle were missing, and the night was come. The few souls who were on the farm, turned out in wrath and bewilderment.

"We must find the beasts first, then we will see to the lads," said the head of the household: an old grey man.

The women carried in the wounded youth, and laid him on the bricks.

"Who did it?" they cried.

A voice from the outside cried to them, "It was Rizzardo."

"No, no, no! Not I!" cried Rizzardo.

"You stabbed the other one, and then this one," said the unseen speaker.

"I had no knife," said Rizzardo.

But no one believed him. Beside, that question could wait, as the dead body was waitng under the juniper. What mattered was to pursue and recover the cattle.

Rizzardo went out into the night with the rest to search for the escaped cattle. Even the women went also, leaving the

wounded lad with the old granddame and the shrieking babes; she lifted up the boy's head and gave him a drink of water.

"Who did it?" she asked him.

He shook his head feebly. He knew, but he would not say. He was afraid to say.

"Fulvio was struck dead," he muttered, and his breath was short and thick.

"A nice night's work," said the old crone. "But, Holy Mary! was there ever a fair's end without a letting of blood?"

Six weeks later, Rizzardo, son of Giannone, of the house of Lazzare, was arrested on the charge of having stabbed one of his companions fatally, and another slightly, on their return from the cattle fair of the month of October.

Rizzardo only replied to those who arrested him:—

"I did not do it. No: I did not. I had no knife. I had lost my knife at the fair."

But that no one believed, because, if he had lost it, he would have bought another at the first cutlery stall. A young man without a knife would be more ridiculous than a dog without a tail.

Even his own father and mother did not believe him when he said he had no knife upon him at the fair. He might as well have said he had no shirt. The knife is like the shirt; even if he have nothing else, a man has that. He said his knife had been stolen in the crowd at the fair; but that seemed a silly tale, for the knife is always worn between the trouser-band and the shirt, and no one can get at it.

"Of course he had stuck it into Fulvio Nestio," said his father and brothers. "Why not?"

It did not seem much of a sin to his parents and neighbours. Only to the girl Colletta, who was his sweetheart, it seemed terrible, because she was a softer, sillier thing than the women of the valley, having come from a town, where her people had died in an epidemic of small-pox. She had had no one left except her great-uncle, who was Rizzardo's father. She had learned the rough labour and the hard life of the country side, but she had kept some of her town-bred mother's fancies and prejudices in her; and one of these made her think that this crime, whoever had done it, was a great one.

"Folks are squeamish and white-livered nowadays," said her great-uncle, with scorn. "In my young time no one thought more of sticking a man than a pig. It was all one in the day's work."

"I did not do it," said Rizzardo.

The girl believed him, but no one else.

"Say you did it, like a man," said his father and brothers.

"But I did not do it," repeated Rizzardo, growing angry.

And then he was taken out of their sight by the gendarmes, and kept in prison many months, and finally put on his trial. He was found guilty of manslaughter, and sentenced to twenty-one years' imprisonment, and preceded by two years of solitary confinement. They did not see him again. They were all too

poor to go to the distant town where his trial took place; and what good could they have done if they had gone?

"Why would he not say that he did it?" repeated his people.

"He did not do it," said Letta.

But not even the mother who had borne him thought with her. Of course he had done it. He had not meant to kill Fulvio Nestio; he had only struck out with the knife, as was natural, as a young horse lashes out in its anger, and the blade had gone a little too deep down into the breast-bone; an accident, a misfortune, such as might happen any day to any one.

"He would have done better to look after the cattle," said his father; for two of the steers had never been found or

heard of. They had been drowned, perhaps, or had run riot in the woods, or had been stolen and butchered—who knew?

"He did not do it," Letta repeated again and again to all his family. She never said more than that, for she could not have given a reason for her faith. But she never wavered in her faith, and she brought his mother in time round to her belief, though to the older woman it seemed as natural that a youth should use his knife, as that calves should tug at the cows' udders, or babes should bruise their mothers' breasts.

"They mean no harm," she said, "but when the blood's hot the hand is quick."

Letta had been a handsome girl, but, after this sorrow, she lost her good looks

very early. She grew yellow of skin and hollow of cheek and chest; her hair lost its lustre, and her step its buoyancy.

"'Tis no use crying over spilt milk," said the old man many a time to her. "The boy won't come back; he's as good as dead, or as bad as dead. Take another sweetheart."

Letta said neither yes nor no; but she did not look at the youths, and she always wore a black kerchief over her head, and pulled it low down upon her brows. Every one else forgot Rizzardo, but she did not.

Women soon grow aged in the work of the fields, and she looked old when she was twenty.

"It was better in the old time," he added, "when they made them work in the streets chained together. One could

see them then. They were black as soot, and clad in yellow, and all chained together; but one could see them. What's the use of shutting a poor boy up in a hole, seeing nothing and nobody? 'Tis vile—'tis vile."

Letta did not answer. It was all vague, dull, horrible to her. All she knew was that they had taken Rizzardo for a fault not committed by him, for a death caused by somebody else. Some great power not to be moved, not to be reached, had taken him and put him out of sight. The priest had told her this was justice. It might be so: she could not see any justice in it.

"He said he did not do it," she constantly repeated.

The old father snorted scornfully. He

knew how youngsters lie. He had not the smallest doubt for an instant that Rizzardo was guilty; only it seemed to him merely a young man's hasty stroke, not a thing to make such a pother about and ruin a boy for life.

"It was a wicked thing to do, but then it was not he who did do it," said Letta.

The old man spat on the ground in unspeakable scorn.

"He did it, certain sure, he did it; but 'twas not much matter when all's said."

Fulvio Nestio had been a poor, weak reed of a creature, or he would not have died of one thrust of a blade. So the sturdy old man thought. When he had been a youngster himself he had had as many disputes and riots as there had been Saints' days in the calendar. A

man enjoyed the right to settle his own quarrels as he chose. Why did the blackguard law come interfering?

Letta had various suitors, for she was quick of hand and strong of muscle, and she was known to be skilful with calves, and chickens, and silkworms. They were all peasants, for there was no one else near for many a square mile; but some of them were well-to-do, and her relatives could not think why she rejected them. It never occurred to any one that it was because she thought still of Rizzardo. She might as well have thought of the skulls and the skeletons in the church crypt.

He had gone out in the dark, like a rush candle blown in a strong draught.

His brothers and sisters never spoke of

him. They were ashamed to remember they had a felon belonging to them. It had made a mark on them, as a fire makes a bare black place on a country-side. One by one they drifted away; the maidens married, the youths went across the seas. Letta alone remained with the old people. They took her presence as a right. Had they not given her a home when her father had died, poor, silly soul that he had been, going and nursing other folks and taking the black small-pox?

There is not much gratitude amongst peasant folks; their hearts are apt to harden with much toil, like their hands and feet. Fine feelings are apt to be plucked up as roughly as the jonquils and narcissi are plucked up between the corn.

"You are those old folks' servant," said a man who wished to marry her.

"They were good to me when I was little," she answered; but in herself she thought, "I should have been their daughter if Rizzardo had not chanced on that misfortune."

Rizzardo and she would have lived here under the walnut trees and cherry trees, whoever else might have gone away. Rizzardo had been attached to the old house, and always a dutiful son.

One day when Letta was plucking beans in the fields in the heat of noon a neighbour called to her across a spinney, hallooing through his joined hands:—

"There's a man here wants to see you. He's a tramp; he's dying for sure.

He lay in my shed last night, and I found him here this morning."

"Wants me?" she said in wonder. Then her heart stood still. Was it—could it be, Rizzardo?

"He's a stranger to these parts, but he wants you," said the neighbour. "Come along, he's dying; he can do you no sort of harm."

"I was not afraid," said Letta; but her teeth chattered from emotion as she left the lines of beans, and went across the two fields which divided her from the speaker. Together they went through the hawthorn, and brambles, and young larches of the little plantation till they reached some rough grass-land, on which stood a shed beside two stone tanks for washing linen, which were set on the

edge of a spring. She saw a miserable creature, wrapped in rags, and lying huddled up on leaves and dry ferns. She made the sign of the Cross. He was not Rizzardo, and it was clear to see that he was dying.

"You're the woman he should have married?" said the vagabond, raising his head. "You're Colletta, eh?"

She gave a sign of assent.

"Aye, she's Letta," said the neighbour, standing by in curiosity.

"Then," said the man, in a flickering voice, "I'd like to tell you that your sweetheart did not kill the man Fulvio Nestio; leastways not with his own knife, for I stole his knife in the fair. There 'tis."

Letta seized the knife and looked at

it. On the horn handle there were scratched letters she knew.

"The Holy Mother of us all be praised! 'Tis his own knife," she cried with trembling lips. Then she turned on the tramp with anguish. "Oh, man! Why did you not speak before? One word—one word——"

"They'd have taken me," said the fellow sullenly.

"For sure that's a good reason," said the neighbour; "a man can't be expected to put his own head in a trap."

"Oh Lord! Oh Lord! Oh Mother of Mercy!" cried Letta; and then she covered her face with her apron and screamed aloud piteously, like a shot hare.

The neighbour ran to call the priest, but the presbytery was up in the hills;

and before he could get there the vagrant had the death-rattle in his throat, and died without another word or another look.

But the knife was safe in Letta's bosom; the old horn knife which had cut blackberry branches, and prised open walnuts, and peeled apples, and cut straw to wind round wine flasks, and trimmed river canes to make matting, in the days when she and Rizzardo had been young and happy, frolicking together in the woods and lanes. Poor Rizzardo! he had always said that he had lost his knife at the fair, and no one except herself had ever believed him.

"If the people who have got him could be told this thing, they would let him out," she said to the priest that evening; but the priest was doubtful.

"It would not, I fear, be evidence," he said sadly.

"Not what?"

"It would not prove anything."

"How? When it is his own knife, and the man confessed to stealing it?"

The priest sighed.

"If it had been known at the time of the trial, when it could have been followed up and seen into, perhaps it might have been found to be evidence. But now—a dead man, no witnesses, merely a tale that the knife was stolen—who would listen? We should easier move those mountains."

"It is Rizzardo's knife," said Letta.

That was sufficient for her. She kept the knife in her bosom, between her rough shift and her brown skin.

It was like what a little bit of Rizzardo might have been to her; almost like a child of his. She did not believe what the priest said. It was testimony to her as clear as the stars. If his knife was stolen at the fair—and it had been stolen—here it was—how could he have stabbed Fulvio Nestio with it?

She said this to herself a thousand times, ten thousand times; and it was not possible for her to understand that this proof, so all-convincing to herself, would be nothing at all in the eyes of the law. Moreover, she could not comprehend how this fact should be made known; she thought perhaps the vicar might tell it from the pulpit, and that so it would become known in that way elsewhere, but she was not sure. She

was not stupid, but she was absolutely ignorant; she had always lived under the shadow of the hills, amongst the crisp, wet herbage, like a lark or a hedgehog. All her mind and sight were given to her field work; no one near her ever talked of anything else, and even the priest was a humble, simple countryman, as illiterate as he could be to be in orders at all, and more occupied with his small glebe, and his few rows of vines, than with any other matter.

She had no one to consult or take counsel with; she had only the knife to look at and Rizzardo's old father to listen to, who said a dozen times a day: "Well, I was always sure he did it, certain sure; but if he hadn't his knife he couldn't do it, and here the knife is. Yes, that's his knife, yes, for sure."

But farther than that he did not go; only once he said, after Mass, to an old friend as they cracked nuts together, "Can't somebody tell the lad that the knife has been brought back?"

But no one knew how that could be done; he was in his living grave. To men such as Rizzardo had become, no friends can send messages. The endless silences brood over them.

"Father," said Letta one Sunday evening as they sat on the bench by the door; she always called him thus. "Father, would you let me go and see Rizzo, and tell him, and get him out of jail?"

"Eh?" said the old man, astounded.

She repeated her words.

"You don't know where he is," said the old man. "Nobody does."

"His reverence does."

"And where is it?"

"In the north somewhere."

"And how could you go to the north? Lord love us, you're right on mad!"

"I would find out, somehow or another. The Holy Mother herself would lead me, surely," she added. And the old man crossed himself at the sacred name.

But he cried, "Lord, who'll do the work here?"

His consent was not won for many a day afterwards. He and his wife were old, and they had grown used to put all their needs upon Letta. He stormed and swore, and his wife sobbed and fretted. Letta was their right hand, their prop, and stay, and comfort. All their own children had gone away, and had left

them to do as they could, and scarcely wrote once a year; but she was like the very roof tree of the house. Not a chick was hatched, or a pig helped in labour, or a sick cow cured, or a sheaf of herbs cut, or a pot put on the fire without Letta. But for the first time in her life she found some strength of will. She was very quiet, but she was resolved. They were obliged to let her do as she wished.

She left all in order, and called in a young neighbour to take her place, and with her black kerchief as usual on her head, and a dark shawl wrapped round her, she went down the valley in the dew of the early morning, the old knife in her bosom, and a change of linen in a pack.

A new life had come into her since she had held that old knife in her hand.

She had never doubted Rizzardo's innocence, but now it was proved to her. A dying man would not have come there only to tell a useless lie. Her acquiescence in fate ceased, and gave place to a strong, if blind, impulse to act, and serve the one so cruelly snatched away from her.

Since she had come to it at ten years old, she had never been out of sight of the twisted chimneys of this farmhouse. But she took courage and let them sink below the horizon. Soon she ceased even to see, when she turned and looked back, the waving topmost boughs of the larches, and the rounded, massive domes of the walnut trees. Yet another mile or two, and all around her had become strange country, with not a landmark on it for her.

The priest had written out all names and directions necessary for her guidance, and she had brought a little money, all in coppers, all that there had been in the family savings-box which was kept in the well; besides this, she had two pierced silver armlets, and a string of small coral, which had come down to her from her grandmother, long, long before this time. But she did not think much about these things, she was thinking always about Rizzardo, and of how she would show his knife to the gaolers, whoever they were, who kept him chained up, and how then perhaps they would see how guiltless he had been, and set him free.

It was fine, clear, autumn weather, and she walked more than a dozen miles in a day, but when night fell she had

to sleep wherever she found a roof to shelter her, and then she felt very lone, and strange, and wretched, and dared not unloose her stays ere she lay down on these rude, unfamiliar beds. It was only the poorest houses which would shelter her, for she looked very poor, and she was silent to all, and no one could tell her errand. She passed through historic cities, over gleaming rivers, under war-worn walls, by gardens sung of by poets, along thronged and noisy highways, through vast silent lands, once battle-fields, now wastes of wild grasses and of reeds and flowers, but she noticed nothing. She only showed the name which the priest had written as her destination, and asked, "How far still?" And for a long while it was always very far away.

She grew footsore, and had pains in all her bones, but she persevered on her errand. Several times she was stopped by the police, but the priest had taken care that her papers were all in order, and she was allowed to proceed.

Many days had gone by, so many that she had been unable to keep a clear account of them, and she would have doubted that she was still in the same country, or the same world, if she had not seen that the sun and stars looked the same as they had done in her valley. She had got very far north, when at last she reached the place of which she had learned the name by heart, orally, from the Vicar.

"It is many, many leagues," the Vicar had said to her. "It is more than six score miles."

But measurement conveyed no sense of distance to her.

"I will ask the way," she said.

"The dialects differ in different districts," said the priest. "You will not understand the people, nor they you."

She did not know what he meant, and did not ask him.

She had entered on the great plain of Lombardy, but she did not know its name. The season was early autumn; the vintage had begun. Everywhere the gold and green of sun-lightened foliage was broken by teams of oxen, by troops of peasants, by red-tiled houses and brown granges, by little villages clustered round spires or towers.

The land seemed wonderfully wide to

her. Its great width frightened her. Both the land and the sky were so narrow at home in the little green valley. Then the people, the endless streams of people in the towns! She would never have supposed that there had been so many people living at one time.

She had been many days on her journey when, under the shadow of lofty, snow-topped mountains, she entered at length the town of which the Vicar had written the name for her guidance, a small, gloomy, and walled city, set in the full blast of Alpine winds, crowning a hill, and remaining but little altered from the times of Cun Grande and Il Moro. In its centre rose a huge mass of masonry, a square keep, with a round frowning tower at each corner of it.

All the loop-holes or windows which were visible from below had been walled up, long lines of bastions stretched beneath it; beneath them in turn were the roofs of houses, the belfries of churches, the trees of gardens.

It was the great Mastia, or fortress, used in modern times for a penitentiary. It looked black, cold, brutal, terribly strong. The sky was pale above it, and a fierce wind was blowing. She climbed up the steep stairs cut in the face of the cliffs, by which people on foot could mount by a shorter road than that which served for animals and vehicles. At the summit was a brown, bald, cheerless square; the dead leaves were being driven along it by the rough mountain wind.

The great Mastia filled three sides of the square. There were sentinels in the archways, some cannon stood in the courtyard; from the fourth side the Pennine Alps were visible across a plain.

She stood and looked in terror at the huge, sombre, savage pile. Was it there—there? Could Rizzardo be there, he who had always lived in the air, and the sun, and the greenery?

She went up timidly to a sentinel and murmured a question.

The man did not move, or even look; he did not seem to breathe. A woman passing pulled her by the skirt.

"If you speak to them, you will have trouble."

"I want to go in there," said Letta.

"Rizzo is in there. I have got his knife. He did not do it. They must let him out. He did not do it."

The woman understood.

"If he be in there you will not do him any good—knife or no knife. Get home, my poor soul."

The woman, who had a crate of live fowls on her head, went into the outer works of the fortress by a grated door, which opened for and closed on her. Letta stood and gazed at the walls, which were as impenetrable as a masked face.

She did not dare speak again to the sentries. There was a loud iron bell ringing, with slow, ponderous, re-echoing strokes. The sound filled the whole square.

"Is that for the prisoners?" she

said, frightened, to an old man who was sweeping up the leaves.

"No; they don't count them when they die," said the sweeper. "'Tis the Governor's wife that is dead."

"How can one get in there?"

"No one can get in——"

"Not to see any one who is there?"

"You are a poor fool. Get home."

"I came very far to see one who is innocent."

"Innocent? What does that matter? Anybody who is in there is condemned. That is what matters."

"But I have got his knife."

"You had best not say so. Knives are forbidden."

Then he went on sweeping his leaves. She lingered on the piazza as long as

daylight lasted; then some one ordered her to go away, and she went down the rock stairs, and found a place of lodging, in the little town below.

By this time she had sold her armlets and her coral, and had only a pittance left; but she was buoyed up by the hope that she would see Rizzardo, soon or late. The next day, and the next, and the next she went up on to the rock and tried to ask and hear something, but she was only answered roughly, and began to be looked on with suspicion. The piazza was open to the public during the hours of daylight, but a poor person who loiters about, and seems to have no real business or errand, is, in these timorous times, always regarded with doubt or worse.

The old sweeper took fright at her, and was not to be persuaded into more speech. She might, he thought, get him into trouble.

But she was so quiet, so sad, so patient, that none could find any excuse actually to forbid her to come up thither; and on the fifth day she had better fortune. A little child between two and three years old had climbed along the stairs on hands and knees, and had reached out too far to pluck some late yellow snap-dragon which tempted his childish fancy. He hung by his woollen skirt on a projecting iron clamp in the rock, and screamed for his mother. But before any one else had seen the danger, Letta reached him, and clutched him, and carried the little terrified creature, in her arms, on to

the solid ground above. The mother embraced, the people present praised, the infant clung to and kissed her.

"She is a stranger, but she is good," they said; and the mother, weeping, cried:

"Anything I can do! Anything!"

Then, hesitating, Letta said:

"There is one Rizzardo Lazzare confined in there. Could you get me speech with him? I have got his knife, and it was stolen from him at the fair, as he declared, and so he never could have done what they said he did."

"There are no men in there," murmured the child's mother. "There are only numbers. What was his crime?"

"He is Rizzardo Lazzare," repeated Letta; "and he must be in there, because

the Vicar himself wrote down the name of this place. Look! They said he killed a man. But he cannot have done so, because his knife was stolen. Here it is."

The woman took the crumpled piece of notepaper, and saw that the titles of the town and of the Mastia were indeed written on it in a clerkly hand.

"Yes; it is here," she said. "But myself I know nothing, and they lose their names; they become numbers, they count for nothing any more. But you saved my child. I will do what I can. I know one of the warders. Come home with me and break your fast. Poor soul, you look starved and worn out."

"Surely they would let me see him if they knew I brought his knife?"

"Eh, no one sees them. They are men

no more," answered the woman. "But I will do what I can. Come and break your fast."

"I want nothing," said Letta. "I only want to see Rizzardo, because now we know he told the truth."

"And he is in yonder for murder?"

"For stabbing Fulvio Nestio; yes. But I said he did not do it, and he did not."

"It is no use to come here for that. You must begin with men of law, and what not. If he has been wrongfully sentenced perhaps something may be done, but it will be hard, hard, hard——"

"I have got the knife, and it was a pedlar who robbed him, who could not die easy without telling us."

"That is all no more use than these weeds," said the child's mother, shaking

the little yellow flowers still held in the baby's rosy fist; "but I may get you some news of him through the warders, for my man works here sometimes: he is a plumber."

"Our Lady and the Saints be with you," said Letta.

Three days passed, and the woman had nothing to tell her, but she made up a mattress in her house in the town, and would have Letta sleep under her roof, seeing how poor and miserable the stranger was, and how friendless she seemed, and how lost in this northern province.

Every day Letta went up on to the piazza with the great gaunt fortress round its three sides, and on the fourth side the Pennine Alps, shining silver white in the daylight.

"Can the prisoners see those mountains?" she asked her friend.

"Lord, they see no more of aught than toads see under stones!" said the woman.

Letta shuddered.

She seemed to feel that great fortress lean over, and on to her, like a huge black bird. She sat on the parapet of the wall and made a grass wreath for the little child and thought of Rizzardo, so near her on the other side of those walls, and yet so far away. What was the use of keeping him shut up there? Even if he had been guilty, of what use would it have been? And he was not guilty. She slipped her hand inside her shift and felt for the old horn knife.

On the fifth day the child's mother came to her and said, "I have seen the warder,

the one I know; he will be in the church below at three o'clock. He does not care to be seen, for they ought not to speak of the prisoners. But he will tell you what he knows."

The church immediately below the rock was a dark, gaunt place, of the same date as the fortress; it was rarely visited, though Mass was celebrated there and vespers, and Dominican Fathers officiated.

It was dark as night when Letta entered it, and let the ponderous black leathern curtain fall behind her. A strong, lean, close-shaven man was waiting for her near the entrance. He was one of the guards of the cells; it was a rare hour of leisure, and he grudged it. He kept his hand on a revolver which was invisible under his cloak.

"Rizzardo?" said Letta with a gasp, and she dropped down on her knees on the stones before this man, who seemed to her omnipotent as God. "Rizzardo Lazzare? Oh tell me, sir, tell me for mercy's sake!"

"He stabbed a comrade as they came home from a fair, and got twenty-one years?"

"No! he had no knife! Listen, oh listen——"

She writhed in agony at his feet.

"It does not matter whether he had, or had not," said the warder. "I am sorry for you, but the man is dead; he died more than twelve months ago, of fever and dysentery. But he was imbecile some time before that. He got stupid in the solitary cell. The family must have

been informed. Are you not one of the family?"

Letta was mute.

"Do you not understand?" said the man.

The little child's mother laid her hands on the kneeling figure, and tried to drag her up from the stones.

"Do you not understand?"

Then the warder added:—

"Notice of the decease must have been sent in its due course."

Letta was still silent.

She had never thought of the possibility of death.

She put out her hand, and caught the other woman's skirt.

"Ask him—the grave—let me go there."

"There is no grave," said the warder, with impatience. "The surgeon here had

the brain; the body was put in the ditch with quick-lime. Good day to you."

Then he touched his cap and went with a martial step, which rang loudly on the stone pavement, out of the aisle of the church.

Letta swayed to and fro twice or thrice where she knelt, then fell face downwards, the horn knife bruising her breast.

One evening, as the red sun of early winter was going down behind the hills, she returned home, a toil-worn, discoloured, stooping, slow-moving figure, which the dog was the first to recognize.

The old man had come in at that moment with a load of faggots just cut in the woods. He dropped them, and screamed: "Wife, wife! Here's Letta at last, or 'tis her ghost!"

Then together they both ran to her, and clutched her, and shook her to make sure she was real.

"Rizzo, Rizzo!" they shrieked. "Have you seen him? How is he? What did he say? Did the gaolers believe? Will they let him out?"

Letta put them aside, and dropped down on the bench outside the house, and covered her face with her hands, which the dog fondled.

"He is dead," she said in a low tone. "He died more than a year ago—and he has no grave."

A Little Thief

A Little Thief

It was a warm night in February; there was the scent of narcissus and violets already on the air, and the Arno was silvered by the light of a full moon as it flowed under the arches of the Ponte Vecchio.

A small boy was leaning over the parapet and gazing at the water when he ought to have been in bed. But his bed was only a bit of sacking, with some dead maize leaves underneath it; and he liked better the radiant moonlight, and the movements of the fresh, clear, pungent night air. It was past midnight by an hour, and except a few carriages, there was little traffic on the northern quay,

where he stood wishing and dreaming in a vague, half-unconscious way, for he was a child who had once been happy. That time seemed far away.

His father's name had been a fine and ancient one, but he was only called Lillino. His parents were dead; he had only an old great-grandmother, bedridden in the one room in Oltrarno, where he lived with her. He kept her and himself by selling matches, and he was as thin as a match himself, but he was a pretty boy, with his great brown eyes and his loose auburn curls, and such a wistful, pleading smile, that hardly any girl or woman passed him without buying, and no dog without a kindly dab of the tongue.

He was not like the town *monello*, who trades and traffics, and begs, and teases,

and skips and shouts, in the Italian streets. He was always shy and silent, and shrank from his noisy fellow vendors, and never said a word to those who bought of him, but only lifted his heavy, long-lashed eyelids and, if the gaze which met his in return was a kind one, smiled.

His boisterous companions jeered, and joked, and nicknamed him "the *signorino*;" but even they were not very rough with him. There was something in him which checked their tongues and tied their hands, a subtle difference which impressed respect on their rude tempers. One of them called him "Il bimbo Gesù."

His mother had died at his birth, and his father had shot himself after losing all he possessed at a gambling club; the offspring of a secret love intrigue, the

child had been left to his foster-mother, a good woman, who cultivated a little farm on the hills above the Val d'Ema.

She and her spouse maintained him for seven years; then the husband deserted her and emigrated, and a year later she was killed by the steam tram near the Gelsomino, and there was only her old mother left, the aged creature whom he called his "Nonna."

She was turned out of their little farm, and, clinging to the child, and the child to her, they had come down into the city to live; she mended silken and woollen hose, and he sold matches.

It was only in this last year, his tenth year, that the veins of her legs swelled so much that they kept her bedridden, and her sight failed her also, and the

matches became their only support. One by one all their little objects that his Nonna had brought with her into the town were sold, and there remained nothing but the ragged clothes which covered them both, and a few miserable necessary things. They would have died of hunger and of cold but for the charity of those who were not much better off than themselves, and for the occasional alms which ladies, passing in the streets, arrested by the pathetic beauty of Lillino's face, put into his small thin hand. This was not begging, for every one took a box of matches, knowing that if they did not they would cause him trouble with the police, for in theory begging is forbidden. Lillino's body was in the streets, but his soul was in the country.

It was three years since he had seen it, but he had never ceased to think of it.

"Let us go back, Nonna. Let us go back," he said continually. But the poor old bedridden woman could only cry feebly, and answer:

"Oh, my dearie, who would take us there? Who would keep us when we got there? We are here, and here we must abide. Perhaps if the saints would kill me outright somebody would be kinder to you and carry you out of this cruel place—all, all stones and noise and clatter, and full of food and drink for those whose bellies are full already, and never a bit or drop for those who starve in it."

"Do not die, Nonna," said Lillino, clasping his arms about her. "Do not

die and go away into the earth. Pray, pray, do not. I have only you."

"My poor little one, and what good am I?" she murmured, laying her hand in blessing on his head. "An old log, not even good for burning, for I have no sap left in me. Alas! alas!"

But she was all he had to care for, this bundle of rags under her rugged coverlet, and he had known her all his life; she had been always exceedingly good to him, and in that time, though already aged, had been a strong and hearty woman; and his earliest memories had been of merrily running beside her, with his hand on her skirt, to gather water-cresses in the ditches, or drive the ducks to the rivulet, or gather olives, chestnuts, blackberries, wood-strawberries,

or do any one of those other lighter labours which occupy the old people and the young children in the fields and woods, and make everybody useful from three years old to ninety.

Now Nonna was of use no more, and Lillino tried with all his might to do his utmost to be of use enough for two. He never doubted that he belonged to her, or rather he never thought about it; he had always seen her near him, and he had always heard Mamma Rosa, whom he had been taught to believe was his mother, call her grandmother. No one had ever told him that he had patrician blood in his veins. Mamma Rosa had always intended to tell him the story of his parentage when he grew older, but death had come to her in crushing suddenness,

grinding her spine under the accursed iron wheels, and, like so many others of her class, she had not set her house in order whilst yet there had been time.

And if he had known of his birth it would have made but little difference to him in his helpless childhood; he would not have been less poor, less hungry, less friendless, and a certain pride and virility which were underneath his feeble ignorance and impotence would have kept him from seeking out those by whom he had been disowned and abandoned.

This poor old creature, scarcely alive, except in the warmth of her affections and the pains of her limbs, was all he had on earth, and he clung to her with the tenacity of a tender and timid nature! And his idea was that if only he could

get Nonna back to the country she would become well and strong once more, and able to walk out in those green places and amongst those grassy streamlets which neither she nor he had ever forgotten.

"I am sure she would get well," he thought, as he leaned over the stone parapet and watched the river glide away under the moon.

But how to carry her there? She was like a log, as she said, with limbs which were wholly useless, without power to move any part of her except her lips, dependent on her neighbours for every bit and drop. Nothing but a miracle could ever raise her again on her feet; but Lillino believed in miracles, or, more truly speaking, miracles seemed natural to him—a constant part of daily life.

True, he saw them no more in the

streets and the homes, but he saw them in the frescoes, in the sculptures, in the carvings in the churches, and he thought the halt and the blind and the sick could all be cured if some one unseen and unknown was good enough to do it. But all he saw and heard in the unkind streets began to make him feel that the real meaning of miracles was money; that strange, dirty, ugly paper thing which was, he saw, so powerful in such amazing ways.

What was it, if not a miracle, that a scrap of soiled paper, crumpled and dog-eared, could procure bread for the hungry and wine for the weak? Even those black-rimmed bronze coins—how much they could do, only passing from hand to hand! Who gave so much money to some people, and left others with none at all? This disparity

seemed as strange to Lillino as it has seemed to so many seers and sages through so many centuries; an injustice which can never be repaired, try how the seers and sages may to redress the uneven balance.

Lillino had not much understanding, and Mamma Rosa had been too busy herself all day long to attend to his education, either moral or mental. He groped his way as he could to his few ideas, and his thoughts were confused and tangled. But these two were clear to him. Nonna would get well if she went back to the country, and with money she could be taken there, carried, he was not sure how, but in some way, back to those vineyards and pastures and running brooks where his babyhood had been spent, and her whole life had passed. But the extremely scanty

means he ever gained did not even suffice to keep life in himself and her, and pay for their one room under the roof.

This night, as he leaned over the river wall, the moon was at the full, and the water was high; it had a strange attraction for him as it flowed towards the weir, reflecting the long double lines of the lamps. He came away from it reluctantly, not to be scolded by the person of the place they lived in for being out too late. He went up the Vua Serragli and into the Vua dei Caldaie, one of the oldest in Oltrarno, and towards a black, grim house of stone, opposite the wall and the trees of a part of the Torrigianni Gardens. This was where he lived, with many others as poor, and the garret he and the old woman rented was a mere nook under the eaves.

On the moonlit flags of the street he saw an object shining; his feet touched it, he picked it up; it was a little bag of golden chain-work with a gold snap; he opened it, he saw it was full of coins—such coins as he had never seen in his life, except in little bowls in money-changers' windows.

The Madonna or Mamma Rosa had sent it!

Nothing else occurred to him. It was a miracle! An answer to his prayer!

He slipped his hand, which had closed on it, into his ragged shirt, and took his homeward way, his ears singing and his brain turning, and his heart throbbing, in his persuasion that Some one in heaven, Some one, had heard and answered his prayer! Surely it was Mamma Rosa, sitting now beside the Madonna!

He thought he heard her saying as she sat on the Madonna's right hand: "Dear and Holy One, let me send something to my little Lillino." Oh yes, he felt sure that it was Mamma Rosa. Had she not always given him all she had, and did she not know how much he wanted to take Nonna back to the country? Mamma Rosa had always taught him, indeed, that what was other people's he must never touch nor take, but this thing was no one's; it was lying in his path; it was plainly put there by some merciful hand; it was a miraculous gift, a gift of the heavenly host, who were so much kinder than those on earth.

He climbed the steep stone stairs, ninety-three from the basement to attic, dark, slippery, foul-smelling, full of dust and mud and cobwebs; he hugged the little

purse in his breast, he smiled to himself radiantly as he climbed up the steps one by one with tired, aching feet.

He opened the wooden door by its latch and gently entered the room, for Nonna might be asleep, and it would harm her to startle her, even to tell her such good tidings.

Through the unglazed hole in the wall which served as a window, the moon-rays were shining, coming over the Torrigianni trees; they shone on the wretched bed of leaves and sacking, the old woman lying on her back. Her face looked very peaceful; lean, yellow, and wrinkled though it was.

"She is asleep," he thought; it would be wrong to awaken her even to hear of the gift from Mamma Rosa. Noiselessly, he ran across the brick floor, and sat down

on his own bit of sacking, and began to think. Now he had all this money, it would be easy to move his Nonna out of the city and carry her up, up, up, along the green and gracious ascent of the hills, and never stop until she could be set down under the peach boughs and the walnut leaves, where the little brimming brooks were running amidst the grass.

He opened the pretty shining bag again, and poured the gold coins out upon the sacking. The moon-rays shone also upon them. He counted them. There were twenty. What they were worth he did not know, but a great deal, he felt sure. With them Nonna would be able to buy their farm, and they could live happily there, both of them for ever, seeing the blossoms and the fruits come and go.

He longed to wake her, but he dared not; one of the women had told him never to disturb her when she slept. How glad she would be when she did awake and heard that they could both go home! There was a carter who lived in the house; he would take them, making a bed of hay in the cart for Nonna; that would be easy to do, when once they could give him a shining gold piece for his trouble. And once there, all the rest would follow of itself. When once she could see the green again, and see the buds on the fruit trees, she would begin to move her limbs and get back her strength, and they would pay to have a Mass said every day in the church up above amongst the olives, a Mass of thanksgiving to the Madonna and Mamma Rosa.

He had only eaten a bit of black bread all the day, and his brain was a little dim, and his thoughts were confused. He had been walking about on the stones ever since morning. His head ached and his feet ached, and his brow and lips were hot and dry, but he was so happy! The moon looked at him over the trees and seemed to smile; he lay down with his arms outstretched, so that they embraced the motionless body of his only friend, and his hands, clasping the little purse, rested upon the rags which covered her.

"She will be so glad when she wakes," he thought; "when she wakes and hears we can go home."

Then he, too, fell asleep, and dreamed of angels, and fountains of gold, and little red-throated birds singing amongst flowering

fruit-trees, and grassy paths beneath the vines, and brown rippling rivulets, and Mamma Rosa standing, smiling with the sun about her feet, and saying, "Our Lady sent me."

Then his sleep became too profound for dreams, and he breathed deeply, unconsciously, whilst the moon passed upward, and its light ceased to shine upon his face and that of his Nonna.

The trampling of feet on the brick floor aroused him; a rude hand clutched his shoulder, and another hand seized the gold. "Here is the little thief," said a brutal voice, "and here is the lady's purse."

"The little heartless wretch!" said a voice as rude. "Look! He is safe here, he thinks, because the old woman is dead!"

The Fig Tree

The Fig Tree

"MOTHER," said a countryman to his wife, "I am going to gather those figs; they will be over-ripe if they hang any longer."

"So they will," said his wife, who had that excellent thing in woman, a readily consenting tongue.

He took a big skep, and a light ladder, and went out of the house, and across the courtyard, strewn with straw, for the wheat had been thrashed a little while before, peopled by poultry, pigeons, and pigs rummaging amongst the straw, and surrounded on three sides by walls covered with vines.

"Won't you let one of the boys do it, Giovacchino?" the woman called out after him. "You're a heavy weight, and——"

"I'm not so heavy yet that I can't climb a tree!" said her husband rather testily as he crossed the sunny court, and went out by an old gateway from which the gate had long departed.

Cesira, his wife, went on with her cooking, which was primitive. It was eight o'clock in the morning. There was no clock or watch in the house; they always guessed the hour by the sun's place in the heavens. The sun had mounted a good deal higher in the sky, and her pot boiled and her bread was browning: but her man had not returned. A little later her second son Oneiro came in from work; he was hungry; then her

elder son, Alessio; then her three girls, who had been up in the woods above cutting fuel. They were all hungry, and eager for their bean-broth.

"We must wait for father," said Cesira. "He is a long time gathering those figs."

"I will go and call him," said Oneiro, a youth of twenty, fair, stalwart, ruddy, an ideal for a young David.

"Aye, do," said Cesira. "He may have gone on up higher to the peach trees."

Oneiro went, whilst the others cast themselves sulkily on chairs and an old bench; they were hot, tired, and sniffed with open nostrils, impatiently, the smell from the boiling pot.

Oneiro had been absent but a few minutes when they heard a terrible scream, succeeded by others still louder

and still more ghastly. They all rushed out of the house and the court, and up a grassy slope whence the sounds came. They were met midway by the youth; his face was blanched, his fair hair stood on end, his teeth chattered. He could not speak an intelligible word; he could only scream, scream, scream.

"Father!" cried the others, and, pushing past him, they ran up the slope under the vines to where the great fig tree stood. Cesira was the first to reach it. Under the tree her husband was lying like a log; a rotten branch snapped in twain lying beside him told its tale. His neck was broken. When they lifted him up his head hung loosely, and wobbled from side to side, like the head of a dead fowl. He was a heavy man, and

he had mounted imprudently from his ladder on to a bough which had been unable to bear his weight.

That day the soup in the pot boiled itself away to waste. No one ate in that house.

Poor Giovacchino was dead, at forty-five years old; a good man, and a good worker, whose forefathers had lived on that same spot for three centuries. An imprudent step, a branch eaten away inside by larvæ, had ended in a second his useful and harmless life.

The frightful suddenness of the death had stunned and cowed them all, and their mother was like a woman deprived of reason, screaming, and falling from one fit into another. Grief is very violent in these parts; happily it is usually short-lived.

There were but few neighbours on that sparsely populated hillside, but the few people there were, flocked in like sheep from far and wide, attracted by that seduction which lies for the most ignorant in a tragedy. They screamed, they stared, they told tales of similar accidents, and of traditions of how the dead had been brought back to life. The parish doctor came, and examined the fractured bones, and said the man was stone dead; the vicar of the parish came and performed the usual rites; there was nothing more to be done than to order the coffin of the carpenter, and apprise the gravedigger.

With nightfall all these visitors went away; the family was left in solitude to its dolor. Cesira was lying in a stupor

produced by some laudanum which the doctor had forced on her. The girls were taking it by turns to watch by her and the corpse, sitting outside the door, for they were afraid of that stiff, shapeless figure covered by a sheet.

They were sturdy, fair-haired, boisterous, merry maidens. But now their mirth was stilled; with that terrible body stretched upstairs motionless, the broken neck lying on the best pillow, and a sprig of basil placed in each nostril, all gaiety had fled for the time from that household.

Oneiro and Alessio sat in the kitchen, and for the first time broke their fast by some maize bread and some watered wine, a petroleum lamp flaring between them on the bare table of mulberry wood.

Oneiro was a fine, strong youth, of good character and untiring in the fields; he scarcely knew his letters, and could not write his name; but he worked on the farm from dawn till dark, as untiring and strong as one of his own oxen. Alessio was of another type. He had learned every thing that he had been able to acquire from priest and schoolmaster, but he was of little use on the farm; as a child he had cried to see the pigs and the chickens killed; he would not beat the bullocks or overwork them; any books he could get hold of he read; he was silent, docile: his people thought him stupid. As the elder son he was doomed to go to the army; he dreaded it unspeakably. He had an oval, pensive face, with great soft brown eyes and a straight

profile; he resembled the St. Sebastians of old masters.

They were both heart-sick and woeful, for their father had been a good father to them from their infancy. They were still stunned by the suddenness of the calamity and by the sense of responsibility, too weighty for their years, which it laid upon them.

"Will they let us remain?" said Oneiro; would the steward who managed the estates, which belonged to a great nobleman far away, not consider them too young to be left on the farm?

Alessio knitted his level brows. "Surely, surely," he murmured. "We have been here centuries."

"But they may think us too young, and mother too weak."

"You must marry. I shall be away in the barracks."

Oneiro was silent; he had not thought of that.

"Marry; that will age you," said Alessio, unconscious of the satire lying in his words.

"We must ask Messer Rocco," said Oneiro. Messer Rocco was the steward. Under his sincere sorrow a vague warmth of pleasure glowed. There was a girl a few miles off, fresh as a rose; he had walked with her on Sundays and feast-days, and her parents had been civil and smiling. She had been reared on a farm, and knew its duties and hardships.

"Take Erinna," said Alessio, with a smile. He knew his brother's inclination.

Then he rose hastily, leaving half his

bread uneaten, half his draught undrunken.

"What beasts we are to speak of anything but him!" he said; and the tears rolled down his smooth olive cheeks.

"Ay! and 'tis only twelve hours ago," said Oneiro. "One would say it was twelve years; it does seem so far away."

Their father had always been there; a rock of strength, a harbour of refuge, a sure and trusty friend; the two youths felt like two lost sheep without him.

Old Boh, the dog, came and rubbed his head against their knees, first one, then the other, in sympathy.

Alessio gave him the unfinished bread. "Boh knows," he said.

"Oh, to be sure he knows," said Oneiro. "He crept on his belly under

the bed, and lay a-moaning there, till I turned him out when the doctor came. Father was fond of Boh; he would always have him sleep in on winter nights."

A sob choked the lad's voice, thinking of those long nights when father had told them tales over the fire.

Then he put out the light, and he and his brother climbed up the dark stair and sent the girls to bed and kept the vigil themselves. Oneiro slumbered at his post; but Alessio remained wide awake, staring out at the starry skies, or what was visible of them through the old ogive window of his father's room.

As he leaned against the window he could see the fine mass of foliage standing on the grassy bank, its light-green, glossy leaves shining in the strong moonlight.

He knew the custom of his country-side, to fell as a criminal any tree which has caused the death of man, woman or child. But he had thought a good deal and read a little, had read everything he could get; and he despised such superstitions.

If it had not been for the conscription, he would have felt tempted to put his few clothes and books in a sack, and go to some distant land, Tunis or Tiröl, Brazil or Argentina. But, if a lad be absent when it is his time to serve, he cannot again enter his country; and he loved his country, or at least his country-side, which was all of it that he knew. He thought that, rather than leave it, he would live on as a labourer under his brother all his days.

He turned and looked at his brother, wishing to speak to him of the matter;

but Oneiro was so sound asleep, with his head leaning back against the back of the old carved chair on which he sat, that the elder lad had not the heart to awaken him. He returned to the window and watched the stars which shone above the doomed fig tree.

With the morning, poor Giovacchino was put in his coffin of pinewood, and borne on the shoulders of his sons and neighbours up the steep hill-side to the church, which was three miles distant amongst woods. The torches which the mourners carried flared garish and hot in the cool grey early daylight.

He was left in the mortuary chapel, which was but a small stone hovel like a dog kennel. The burial was to be in the evening; the vicar was away for the day.

They went down the hill-side sadly, but their friends chattered and smoked and made sport with one another. Oneiro even seemed to have ceased to mourn; he was thinking if he could get the steward's consent he would marry Erinna; without it he could not do so. Marry Erinna, and be his own master, and do as he chose. The project smiled at him from the near future. Certainly he was sorry for his poor father; but a young man must think for himself. Oneiro intended to be very good to every one, and to keep his mother and sisters with him; Alessio in two or three years' time, when his service should be over, might come and live in the old homestead, though he would never be of much use on the land.

It was comforting to think that he would

be the ruler there whilst his brother should be away with some regiment. The bees hummed, the sun shone; he tried to feel miserable, but he could not.

Alessio did; he went dully down the hill-path, his hands in his pockets, his head bent; his own position remained what it had been previously, or rather it was less pleasant, because his father had always been indulgent and liberal to him, and had never been harsh to him for his useless love of reading and dreaming; not even when he had found him lying full length on the turf, with some volume open under his eyes, and his plough prone on the unturned earth, and the oxen blinking and swaying their tails to drive away the flies, in the still sultry weather.

These thoughts ran through his mind

as he went down the hill, through the myrtle and bearberry and cistus shrubs. He was very sorry, yes; and his eyes often filled with tears, but he had in his pocket a "Leopardi" which he had bought for a halfpenny at a street book-stall because several of its pages had been wanting. He could not understand all the poems, but some of them had sunk deeply into his mind.

The neighbours went home with them, and drank and ate their fill, feasting plentifully, whilst the girls waited on them; and the widow remained upstairs, still stupid from grief and the after effects of the doctor's opiate. When the men were gone, reeling a little on their homeward way, Oneiro, who was also heated and excited from drinking with them, went

into the wood-house and came back with two axes. He kept one, and held out the other to Alessio.

"We will go and kill the assassin," he said. "It has lived too long."

Alessio did not take the hatchet.

"You mean the tree?" he asked.

"Of course I mean the tree," said Oneiro. "Those men reproved me because it is still standing."

"What matter what they say?" said Alessio with contempt. "They are fools."

"No more fools than you," returned Oneiro roughly. "They thought we lacked respect to father letting it stand there still. Riccardo, he said, said Riccardo: 'It has tasted blood; 'tis wicked in you to let it stand. A tree is like a bull: when once it has killed

a man it goes on killing; it must have blood.' That is what Riccardo said, and he is a shrewd, wise man."

"He is a blind ass," said Alessio. "How can you repeat me such trash, Oneiro? A tree knows naught of malice, or of murder. A tree is a good creature, and knows how to blossom and bear; how to use the soil and the rain; to drive in its roots and put out its leaves; but it knows no more than that; how should it? Father was proud of that tree; he would bid you leave it alone if he were alive now."

"If he were alive now, the tree would not have killed him," said Oneiro doggedly.

"The tree did not kill him. He killed himself. He was a heavy man—God rest his soul—and he went on a rotten

branch and it gave way under him. That was all. Heavy as he was, he would have broken his neck if he had fallen off a chair, like enough."

"'Twas the tree drew him on to it, and it betrayed him, and killed him," said Oneiro, with dogged, vinous obstinacy.

Oneiro had been greatly impressed by the reproofs of the old man Riccardo, and the wine in his head made him insensible to argument.

"It betrayed him, and it killed him, and it shall be cut down as if 'twere a dead bramble for the burning," he said, with the obstinate repetition of the half-drunken man. He had not taken much, but he was unused to wine, and what he had taken buzzed in his brain as if the bees from the hill-side had got into it.

Alessio looked at him with rising contempt.

"The wine's in you," he said curtly, and he took the axe out of his brother's hand, and pushed him on to a bench.

"Sleep it off," he said as contemptuously.

Drink never tempted him in the least, and his intolerance of those who were tempted by it was great. His brother was not often led to drink; indeed, had no means to be so, but now and then, when occasion presented, at funeral, wedding, feast, or fair, he had been seen with his fair face too flushed and his limbs unsteady, and at such times his father and mother had reproved him unsparingly, and Alessio had looked at him with pity and disdain.

"To disobey father now he is dead!" thought he at the present moment; it seemed to him unworthy. Oneiro was too quick to shake off memory. Would he and Oneiro ever agree? He feared not; he thought the old roomy stone house would be too small to hold them both. But there was mother—he loved his mother. Not to return to her when his military service should be over would be impossible.

He went to her room noiselessly to see how she was. He found her arisen, and sitting heavy and motionless, whilst one of the girls was spinning beside her; the two others were in the fields. Her mind was still not clear; her bony brown hands were clasped together on her knees; her head was sunk on her chest.

"'Tis all over, 'Lessi?" she said, with

a certain embarrassment in her speech, as if her tongue obeyed ill the order of the brain.

"No, mother; we must wait for the priest till the evening."

"Euh! euh!" she said, with a groan. "The tree's down, for sure—eh?"

"No, mother."

"Go, cut it down. Where's Oneiro?"

"He is tired, and is asleep. Why do you want the tree cut down, mother?"

"No tree must live that kills a man."

Alessio was silent; he hesitated to say to her that it was his father's own imprudence which had killed him.

"No tree must live that kills a man," repeated his mother doggedly. "Go you and cut it down."

Alessio was still silent.

"If 'twere left standing," said his sister, who was spinning, "we should be the shame of the whole hillside."

"Nay," said Cesira, with a sudden kindling of her stunned spirit; "if we could fail in our duty *so*, every living soul around would come and do our duty for us."

"Surely they would, mammy," said the girl.

Alessio still did not speak. What was the use of speaking?

"Why are you tongue-tied like that, 'Lessi?" said his sister. "You can't think otherwise, surely?"

"Father loved that tree," said Alessio slowly, with hesitation.

"Then it was the blacker crime in it to slay him," said his mother savagely.

"His father planted it. It'll come down to-night, 'Lessi; mind you've cut it up for burning before the burial."

"It is in full fruit," said Alessio.

"Throw the fruit to the pigs," said his mother, "and cut the trunk up for the hearth, and the boughs for the oven. Do you want twice telling? You are no son of mine. Call Oneiro."

"Let Oneiro rest; I will go, mother," answered Alessio.

"Why should they kill it?" he thought. "It is innocent."

The doom of the tree distressed him; he loved it. In the depths of his soul the injustice to it hurt him as though it were an unjust thing done to himself. They said it had killed his father; but why had his father, a stout, big man, been so

imprudent as to mount on to a rotten branch incapable of bearing his weight? How was that in anyway the fault of the tree?

"Why should they kill it?" he thought. "It has no guilt. It is a fair thing, and bears well. Why would poor father climb up on it? Why not have sent me?"

He was slender, and agile, and light, and he would have sprung from branch to branch like a squirrel. Certainly the terrible disaster was poor father's fault—not the tree's.

He went downstairs, passed his sleeping brother, and went out of the house into the courtyard, and through the gateway on to the grass path. Fronting him on the slope was the threatened tree; a spreading mass of light-green foliage shining in the bright afternoon sunlight

as it had shone in the silvery moon-beams. Its branches were rich with ripe fruit; its roots were set deeply down into the shelving earth which was decked with seeding grass, with yellow tansy, and with blue borage. Alessio sat down on a moss-grown stone facing it, and looked at it as he might have looked at some boy-friend doomed to execution before the setting of the sun.

The superstition which decreed the death of the tree seemed to him a grotesque and miserable thing; he had no patience with, or part in, it. He had read enough, and reflected enough, to have shaken off these follies, which cling to the rural mind as stone-crop clings to tiles and thatch. They were the religion of his kindred, and he felt afraid of his own

impiety in his revolt against them; he broke idols which he had been used from his babyhood to see worshipped, and he feared greatly that he might be wrong. He was all alone in his opinion, and he was modest of temper, and had no self-assertion.

But his axe lay unused on the grass at his feet; he could not bring himself to raise it against the tree. He had so many memories associated with it: of being held up in his mother's arms to pull the first ripe fig when he was a little child; of sleeping in its friendly shadow in warm summer noons instead of going upstairs to his hot room under the eaves; here beside it he had first read his ragged, imperfect copy of Leopardi's poems; here one day he had seen two orioles pecking at the fruit, and had held his breath in

delight at their beauty, instead of casting a stone at them as his brother and sisters would have done; once, too, as he had slept at noonday, soundly and dreamlessly, a twig had fallen on him from the branches above, and had awakened him in time to see a dust-adder close to him in the grass, and to escape from it. He had owed his safety to the tree: so he had always thought.

He sat there motionless, with the axe at his feet. The air was still, the sun was brilliant, the red roofs of the cows' stables glowed above the vines; the pigeons pruned their plumage; now and then one of the cattle lowed; up above there were vines, and vines, and vines again, a pear tree or a cherry tree or an apple tree growing amongst them.

Soon he would have to leave it all, the dear familiar place that he had known from his birth. Great tears filled his eyes and obscured the landscape.

"Oh! father, father, why did you not send me to gather the fruit?" he cried aloud, and he sobbed bitterly.

"Lazy loon! Have you not felled the tree in all these hours?" cried the voice of Oneiro, with something in it already of the authority of the master.

Alessio started and looked up; the sun was slanting very low to the westward, and its roseate glow illumined the white-washed walls of the cattle stable.

Oneiro had his hatchet in his hand and a coil of rope. He had slept off his drink, but his face was still red, and his eyes were angry, and his hair and his clothes were

in disorder. The chief thought which still dominated him was that he would marry, and become the head of the house. That consciousness intoxicated him more than the year-old Aleatico wine.

"Let's get this job done," he said roughly. "You might have been half through it by this time. Why aren't you?"

The authority and arrogance in his tone irritated Alessio. There was but a year of age between them, and he was the elder, though it was his fate to go away, soldiering, against his will.

"You are not master here yet," he said. "Keep a civil tongue in your head. Mother's over both of us at present."

That was true, and its truth stung Oneiro. Without his mother's consent there would

be no marriage for him with Erinna for five years to come.

"Maybe she is, maybe she is not," he said doggedly. "Anyhow, I mean to see this tree down before sunset. That's mother's will, as 'tis mine. Get you up and fasten the rope. If it isn't hauled back when it's cut through, it'll fall on the stables, and crash on to the roof, and maybe hurt the beasts inside."

Alessio did not move off his stone. He did not mean to have any share in the murder of the tree, and he more and more keenly resented his brother's tone.

"Get up," said Oneiro. "You go behind. I'll stand here."

Alessio did not stir. He was looking at the tree. A light wind, which at that

moment arose, passed over it and made it look as if it shivered in all its foliage.

"Damn you! don't you hear?" cried his brother angrily to see his first command thus disregarded; and he swung himself up the trunk and made fast the rope, now to one part and then to another, knotting it firmly and letting its looped ends hang down to what would be the height of a man's hands. Then he sprang back again on to the turf, and jeered at the tree, and called it by vile names, as though it had ears to hear his insults.

Still Alessio, whose eyes were fixed on it, did not move.

But, when his brother stooped and picked up the hatchet and, swinging the axe up above his head, struck at the tree and gashed the bark with its first wound,

then a sudden shock, like an electric current, ran through the lad's veins. He leapt to his feet, his hair flying back, his eyes flashing, his olive skin grown pale as ivory, and set himself with his back to the trunk, and stood between it and the raised axe.

"Go away, Oneiro!" he shouted. "You shall not touch it while I live."

"Get out of my way, you madman," shouted Oneiro. "Are you to rule the roost here? Go and pull at the rope, as it is your duty to do. Get out!"

But Alessio did not obey, did not seem even to listen. He leaned his shoulders against the bark of the tree, and his face was resolute and stern.

"You shall not touch it whilst I am on the land," he said between his teeth.

"'Tis an innocent thing. You shall not touch it."

"Get out!" screamed Oneiro, beside himself with rage. "May the saints grant me patience."

"You shall not touch it, I say!" said Alessio, and he looked his brother full in the eyes. "You shall not. Put down your axe."

Oneiro, with a string of oaths, swung his steel hatchet once more above his head, and brought it with overwhelming force against the tree. But it did not strike the trunk; it struck the throat of his brother. It cut half through the slender, smooth, adolescent neck, and the blood of the great artery escaped, hot and terrible. The body of Alessio swayed and fell forward. He dropped, face downward, amongst the flowers.

Oneiro flung his axe far from him with a scream, and fled; the curse of Cain upon him.

Alessio was found by one of his sisters stretched upon the sod in a purple pool of blood. He was of course quite dead.

Oneiro was never heard of again.

Their mother, mad with grief, called all her neighbours, and with fire and steel, and screaming curses, tore the fig tree from its place, and hacked and burned its deepest roots, and left no trace of it except a deep charred hole in the blackened grass and piles of wood ashes on the earth.

Alessio, like greater men, too clear of sight, too merciful of heart, had lost his life, for pity's sake, in vain.

Gerry's Garden

Gerry's Garden

"Come out of the garden, Gerry. It is raining," said an old woman to a little boy in a holland blouse and a sailor hat.

"Oh, it doesn't hurt one, granny," said the little boy. "It kisses. It doesn't wet."

"It will give you a bad cold all the same, my dear. Come out of the garden, Gerry," she repeated; and Gerry, who was a good little man, with a sigh obeyed; took off his hat, and came off the gravel into the room, bringing his spade in with him, and beginning at once to clean it, as a gardener should do

before putting it away to await better weather.

"That's being a good boy, Gerry," said the old woman, and she stroked his fair, curly head.

Gerry made a little sound, half sigh, half groan, and glanced wistfully under the arch of the small porch at his garden, where a fine April shower was falling.

"There's all the pansies to be planted still," he murmured.

"You shall plant them to-morrow," said his grandmother. But to-morrow seems a hundred years away when one is only seven years old.

It was a small and very old house in which he and his grandmother lived; one of a row of ancient almshouses, built

and endowed in the reign of Elizabeth, solid, quaint, pleasant habitations leaning one against the other as the nests of the weaver-birds do; with gable ends, thatched roofs, low-arched doors, and latticed windows; all of them were nutshells in size, but clean as constant scrubbing and dusting could make them, and each dowered with a little garden, the gardens enclosing three sides of a turfed square. Here there dwelt eighteen old people and only one child, and that child was Gerry the gardener, as the old folks called him.

By the rules of the foundation no one under seventy years of age could reside there, whether man or woman, married, or single, or widowed. Gerry owed his admittance to the fact that he had been

a foundling, laid down by the sundial in the centre of the square, no one knew how or by whom. Mrs. Lane, who now called herself his grandmother, had found him early one morning among the daisies under the granite pedestal; and she, having been nurse during three generations in the family to which the foundation was due, had succeeded, by many prayers and many tears, in prevailing on those in power to break the rules, and leave him with her, instead of sending him to the workhouse, as the authorities wished to do.

No one there had ever been cruel enough to tell him his history, and Gerry firmly believed that he was her grandson, and was called Gerald Lane in right of his birth.

"Poor, pretty dear, why should he ever know otherwise?" said the old people; and, although they were terrible gossips, and liked to take away their neighbours' characters as well as their betters like that pastime, no one of them was ever so unkind as to rob Gerry of his illusion; they would as soon have thought of robbing him of his violets or his moss roses. Truth to tell, they were also a little in awe of Mrs. Lane, who was in a manner the head person amongst them, by right of her association with the family of the founder. Besides, she was known to have a round sum put by in the savings bank; and money makes the man (and the woman) in a row of almshouses as well as in bigger communities.

She who had brought up so many children, and loved them all, brought up Gerry well, and loved him. He was a pretty boy, with eyes the hue of his violets, and a delicate, fair face like one of the Noisette roses which grew in clusters against the door. He looked fragile, but he was always well, and stronger than he looked, and spent all his time in the garden, either in the little plot hedged in by clipped box belonging to Mrs. Lane's habitation, or in one of the other little similar plots running round the square down to its bottom wall, which was of red brick and lofty, and had in the middle of it a tall gateway, through which all the pensioners were bound to pass whenever they walked abroad, for the little houses

had no opening at their backs. All day long, when the weather allowed, Gerry laboured in one of these plots, and made the black earth glow with colour during eight months of the year. One of the old men had been a gardener, and though unfit for work from rheumatism, instructed the child as to seasons and manners of flower culture, and Gerry, very docile and intelligent, listened meekly and learned quickly. When another gardener from the town came, as he did from time to time, to mow the turf of the square, and trim the honeysuckle which covered the frontage, he also added his mite of instruction towards the child's education in horticulture, and the seed fell upon good ground.

Gerry seemed created by nature to be a gardener, and he learned his work with passion and perseverance. He did not pull up his plants by the roots to see if they were growing, or kill them with kindness, as children usually do; nor did he deluge them with water one day, and leave them to thirst vainly for a week afterwards, which is also a childish habit; but fed them soberly and prudently from his little red watering-pot filled at the rain-filled water-butt. His beds were full of pleasant, sweet-smelling, rustic things: many of them were roots dug up from country fields and hedges; sometimes they grew, sometimes they died, but field flowers were the most beloved of all his treasures to Gerry: dearer even than the spotted amber calceolaria and

the violet and white double petunia given him by a florist. The latter were great persons that he was very proud to receive, but the former were homely friends, who talked to him of bees, and honey, and sheep, and singing birds, and all dear, fair country things—for Gerry's active fancy was always wide awake, though never spent in words. He was a silent child, always willing and cheerful, but never talkative.

"Drat it! I do believe Gerry hears the flowers talk, and is all taken up with answering 'em," said Mrs. Lane; but if he heard the flowers talk they must have given him good advice, for he was never late, or rude, or ill-tempered, and never noisy or rough.

The almshouses were in a busy com-

mercial city of the English Midlands, called Milltown. There were many ugly sounds and brutal sights, roar of engines, and hiss of steam, and thunder of pistons in the borough; but Dame Eleanor's Cots, as they had been called during three centuries, were in a quarter which still remained quiet and secluded, with the spire of a stately Tudor church rising above them, and old-fashioned streets and lanes and many trees around them. Here the air was still fresh and clear, and flowers could flourish, and the grass grow green; and the open country itself was near enough for Gerry to run out into it and come back laden with spoils of leaf and blossom.

Sarah Lane was fairly well off, but she had afforded herself the luxury of the

companionship and maintenance of Gerry, and, however shrewd and helpful a person may be, no one can keep a child without his making a hole in their purse, and she put aside for him in the savings bank much that, if he had not existed, she could have spent on her own ease and comfort.

"But he's worth it," she said to herself with conviction, for she loved him tenderly, though he was too quiet and "too shut up in hisself" for her taste; her ideals remaining the saucy, rebellious, harum-scarum lads who had filled her nurseries of yore, and had fought like bull-calves with one another, and when the fray was over had kissed and made friends at her knee.

Living amongst aged people always, and

taught from infancy not to disturb them, it had become second nature to him to trundle his wheelbarrow gently, and play with his ball in silence and solitude, and spin his top noiselessly on the flagstones. The boys in the streets and lanes round about Dame Eleanor's asylum grinned at and jeered him, but Gerry did not care about that.

Old John Stearne, the man who kept the gate, had a knotted stick and no scruples as to using it; but John was aged and slept a good deal in his straw beehive chair inside his porch, and the street boys had a nasty trick of swinging themselves up by the ivy, and from that height shying stones at the almshouse cat and grinning at and mimicing Gerry. He liked neither the stones nor the mimicry, but

he would never leave the garden and the birds as long as these arch-enemies were visible, or forsake poor Prim, the cat, whose manners were so excellent that she never hurt anything, only sat blinking at mouse-holes in the creepers hour after hour, with her white-tipped paws folded under her breast.

"I do hope the blessed boy aren't a coward," thought Mrs. Lane, seeing him so unresponsive and submissive to the insolence of the bigger boys as they made unkind fun of him from the wall coping. She had brought up two generations of boisterous, self-willed, high-couraged children; and Gerry's exceeding gentleness seemed to her sometimes unnatural. When he went with her across the street to the great church and sang with the choir in

his white surplice, she thought he looked like a little angel with his fair curls, and his violet eyes, and his serious mouth, which so rarely smiled.

"But if he don't have a spice of the devil in him he'll fare badly and he'll grow up poorly," she thought, which was not a reflection fit for the holy place she was in; but all her dear young gentlemen had had very much of the devil in them, and they were now scattered over the world—stirring and successful men, captains of battleships, and colonel-commandants of regiments, and all of them sturdy and honoured sons of Great Britain.

Gerry did not mind anything the street-boys did if they did not get into his garden, or tease the cat, or take the nests which were made by swallows and robins and

sparrows, starlings, tomtits, and titmice, on the roof under the eaves, and in the stones of the garden gateway. Mrs. Lane's square bit of ground between the high box hedges was his especial domain; but all the rest was in a sense his garden. He was never happier or prouder than when one of the old people called to him to come and dig for them, or asked him to give them some of the seed of an annual or a slip from his geraniums.

Gerry's garden was known to all the neighbourhood, and every one round was good-natured in letting him have a scrap of any plant they possessed to sow or to strike.

"What'll you be, Gerry, when you've grown a man?" Sarah Lane asked him one day across the small oak tea-table, which

was always laid out with a black tea-pot, a little brown Toby jug of milk, two cups of old Wedgwood, bread and honey, and sometimes a cake, and always in the centre a little pot of flowers, according to the season, and a white saucer which was to hold Prim's portion.

Gerry opened his eyes wide at the question.

"Why, a gardener, granny, of course!" he answered.

"Well, 'twas Adam's trade," said the old woman, rather disappointed, for she loved soldiers and sailors. "I'm not saying anything against it; 'tis useful work and healthy, though they get rheumatics in their backs very early."

Gerry drummed with his little fist on his own backbone above his leather belt.

"Birds aren't rheumatic," he remarked, "and they're always out in the damp and the dew; out o' nights, too."

"They've got oiled feathers, and they don't never ondress," said Mrs. Lane rather crossly. "Wouldn't ye like to go abroad a bit and see the world, Gerry? They all does it nowadays."

"No," said Gerry, shaking his curly head. "I'll never leave you, nor these cots. What 'ud my garden do?"

"Ye wouldn't care to see things, lands and people and the like? There's wonderful flowers, they tell me, in them places where 'tis hot all the year round."

Gerry shook his head again.

"I don't want no better than we've got," he answered, and touched the moss roses which he had put with two York

and Lancaster in the centre of the table. Mrs. Lane laughed, and drank her tea.

"Well, if all on 'em had allus been like you, Gerry, they wouldn't have found out the Amerikeys; but you'll alter as ye grow up, my ducky."

"No I won't," said Gerry; and his eyes watched a butterfly beating at the lattice window. "*She's* allus going about," he said meditatively, "and she dies in three days, the book says."

"Ay," said Mrs. Lane sadly, "them as gad about dies early sometimes."

She was thinking of one of her darlings, drowned, when a midshipman, forty years before, in a typhoon off the coast of Kurrachee; and the memory moving her strongly she got up and took Gerry's head in her hands and kissed his curls.

"Stay in your garden, my dearie; stay with your little flowers and me."

Her hands shook as they stroked his yellow locks, for she thought: Would she live long enough to see Gerry grow up, and would he lay his roses on her breast when her coffin should be lowered into the pit? "I should like to see him a grown man," she thought, with that wistful desire of age for longer life, which youth never pities because wholly unable to understand it.

Gerry munched his bread and butter, and watched the butterfly, which was now hovering over the moss roses.

"They're so pretty; what a pity 'tis they do such a lot o' damage when they're grubs," he said pensively.

"Tell me all about 'em, Gerry," said Mrs. Lane, who was an excellent listener. With her ears trained by the babbling of many childish voices, she knew how to simulate the liveliest interest in what was being related to her, whilst her thoughts were far away with the base treacheries of the butcher, the false balance of the grocer, the sins of the baker in alum and plaster of Paris, and the many similar crosses which darken the path of the thrifty housekeeper.

In the eighth year of Gerry's short and happy life a great blow fell upon all the dwellers in Dame Eleanor's Cots. It was nothing less than a terrible proposal made by Mr. Mayor, in the Town Council of Milltown, to purchase and sweep away the almshouses altogether. In greater cities

than Milltown, it was averred, such antiquated institutions were being every day done away with, and mutated into such monetary compensations as might (or might not) satisfy those despoiled.

So the mayor considered; being a man of his time, with nine hundred fellow-creatures making nails for him in hovels, that he might lead his life as a capitalist and a county magnate.

"Utterly out of date!" he said, striking his cane contemptuously on the moss-grown sundial, and surveying with scorn its companions; the stone wall and the iron gateway, and the little creeper-smothered dwellings ranged one after another like the cells in a honeycomb.

To the mayor the sight of that gateway with its pendent masses of ivy and honey-

suckle, and its old black iron gates with their double E, formed a standing emblem of retrograde obstinacy and bigoted superstition. A slaughter-house, an engine shed, a brewery, a factory, a foundry, a laboratory, would be, when placed there in their stead, a monument of victorious civilization.

Few of the old folks on the Cots had relatives living; those who had shrank from the thought of being a burden on them. Used to the monastic seclusion of this retreat, they all knew that in the city's life they would be as blind, and dazed, and stray, as owls pulled out of their holes into the glare of noon.

But more miserable even than all the old folks was the child. From the time his eyes had opened he had seen these walls around him; he had run across this

sward; he had played in the shadow of this gateway; he had been lulled to sleep by the evening chimes of St. Michael's church; he had been roused by the chirping of the sparrows in the creepers and on the tiles; he had been measured for his height against the stone plinth of the sundial; and he had eaten his bread and milk on summer mornings in the shelter of the clipped box edges or under the bushes of sweet-brier and southern-wood. And the garden was his garden now—all his own, trusted to him and blossoming under his hands.

To go away, and leave the place, was an exile as cruel as death. And it would be, not only to leave it, but to leave it to be trampled into nothingness, to be trodden down by men, to be wounded by

pickaxes, to be disfigured and destroyed under piles of bricks and of iron.

Prim, scared from her sleep on the turf by the sharp raps of the mayor's stick on the sundial, scampered away to a safe distance, and then turned round and spat at him with her back arched and her tail on end.

"You should not frighten our cat, Mr. Mayor. She is a very good cat," said Gerry, who was staring at him, a trowel in one hand, a root in another.

"Who is that unmannerly little boy?" asked the worshipful gentleman; and, on being told, asked by what abuse of the rules of the foundation the child came there?

"You were rude, dear Gerry," said Sarah Lane. "Children should never reprove grown-up people."

"He frightened Prim; and Prim can't speak for herself," said Gerry. "And I think," he added, "that he's a very bad man, for he trod on the daisies instead of taking the path."

"He's no friend, for sure, to the daisies or to us," said Mrs. Lane, who knew all that the mayor and corporation and county council wished by their united efforts to accomplish. There were many legal difficulties in the path of the destroyers; but in the end she feared these would be overcome, and the destroyers would be successful. Her protector, Dame Eleanor's descendant, the member for Milltown, told her so; and he did not see his way to oppose so many influential citizens and electors.

Many of these persons thought the

principle of almshouses pernicious, and the annual doles to the pensioners therein degrading. Such persons agreed that the houses should be pulled down, the land it stood on sold, and the old people given each a yearly sum with which they could live in hired rooms wherever they pleased. When the last of the present occupants should die, there were to be no more appointments made to Dame Eleanor's charity; the capital was to lapse to the city, and be used to endow new laboratories in the town hospitals.

The proposal contained much to please many people who were likely to pick the bones of the carcass, especially to please the medical professors of Milltown; but it did not please Dame Eleanor's pensioners. Headed by John Stearne, they tried to

protest vigorously against such a confiscation of rights three centuries old. They even clubbed their shillings and pence together, and paid a lawyer to draw up a statement of the facts, and a protest against the city's annexation, addressed in the form of a Petition to the Mayor, on whom it made as much impression as the petition of a partridge would make on a head-keeper.

"What has been once given to the people shouldn't never be took from 'em," said John Stearne.

That was clear equity; but poor people against rich people play an unequal game, and the occupiers of the almshouses by St. Michael and All Angels had very heavy odds against them from the onset.

Dame Eleanor Ellis had built these

almshouses and left them in trust to the borough of Milltown with a sum of money, of which the annual interest was to be spent in keeping the houses in decent repair against age and weather; their architecture was never to be changed nor their statutes.

But in Tudor times Milltown had been a small country borough, of which the only mills were those which turned by wind or water. It was now a city; a great, black, ugly, poisonous wen for the most part, and, as usual, its rapacity had grown with its riches. The town councillors had for many years cast greedy, envious eyes on the land occupied by Dame Eleanor's Cots. Even the lawyer engaged by the pensioners told them that they were not in accord with the spirit

of the age; and the mayor gave them to understand in round-about language that they were a set of antiquated fools, blocking the course of progress.

When his granny and the other inmates talked of the fate which was hanging over them Gerry understood all they were saying, for he was precocious in intelligence and comprehension, though so simple a little lad in many ways, living always with old people and with his flowers.

The old red-brick of the Cots, with the golden nasturtium and the purple and white convolvulus climbing on it, almost broke his heart to look at; it was so bright and so ruddy in the sun, and the thatch above it so alive with birds.

"Could nobody save us?" he asked

for the twentieth time of John Stearne. The old gate-keeper shook his white head.

"Not a soul, dearie, not a soul! onless 'twas the Prime Minister hisself."

"Could he?"

"Lord! yes, dearie; he's all-omnipotent like——. But there! What's the good o' talking? We might just as well say if yon steeple could walk and talk!"

"Who is Prime Minister now?" asked Gerry.

John Stearne told him, being an old man who read his newspaper regularly. Gerry listened with extreme attention.

"Where does he live?" he asked.

"In London mosely, I believe," replied Stearne.

"Somebody should tell him," said Gerry.

Stearne laughed drearily.

"Them people are up above like the sun. Who's to get at 'em?"

Gerry looked a little scornful.

"He's only a man," he answered.

The remark shocked Stearne.

"You'll be an Anarchist, if you don't respeckit great folks more'n that," he said with horror.

Gerry did not even ask what this word meant; he was absorbed in a new idea which had entered his head—a wonderful and daring idea which he hugged to himself as he hugged Prim. He could not breathe a word of it to any one, for even granny would most certainly have considered him out of his senses and have given him a dose of senna tea as a cure for delirium. Gerry was a resolute little

lad and courageous; he had considerable ingenuity also in combining plans and ways and means. He went indoors and said to Mrs. Lane:

"If you please, granny, let me have my savings-box."

She went to her cupboard, took out a little box with a picture of a goldfinch and a hawthorn bough on it, and gave it him. All he earned went into it. It was heavy with copper money.

"Have you anything to put in?" she asked, seeing him walk away with it. He hesitated a moment, then said valorously:

"I'm going to break it open, granny."

"Lord sakes, child! What for?"

"To get at the money."

"Of course. But what d'ye want the money for, boy?"

"I would rather not say."

Mrs. Lane was disposed to be sorely huffed. What! Was a child like this to be allowed to have secrets?

"It's my own, isn't it?" he asked, seeing that she was amazed and angry.

"Oh, for that—yes, 'tis your own!"

"Well, then——?"

"Somebody's diddlin' you out of your pence. There's a good lot in that 'ere box."

"I want it for myself," said Gerry, and went away with it.

He sought out a quiet spot in the churchyard, and with a big stone smashed the wooden bank, and poured out its contents on the slab of a flat moss-grown tombstone. There were several sixpences, a great number of pence and halfpence, and one half-crown; all

counted, the sum mounted up to fourteen shillings odd, for the box had not been opened for two years. He had always meant to buy a black silk gown for Mrs. Lane with its contents.

He went to his garden with the money in his handkerchief, leaving the pieces of the broken box behind him. Being, as he thought, unobserved, he dug a hole under a southernwood bush and put the money into it, then filled up the hole again.

"It will be safe there till to-morrow morning," he thought as he trod the moist earth flat over it.

Prim sat and looked on without sympathy. She thought she could dig better holes with her claws.

Mrs. Lane, herself unseen, saw from

within what Gerry was doing. "He thinks 'tisn't safe in the house," she thought, and, reassured that he was not foolishly squandering his savings, she forbore to speak on the matter; after all, she reflected, it was no use to force a child's confidence, and Gerry was a prudent little man. Nevertheless, it pained her that he did not confide in her, and to see him so "miserly-like" over his hoard.

All that day Gerry was silent, even more so than usual, and he was "off his food," as Sarah Lane phrased it, and he seemed always lost in reverie. At tea his eyes were always glancing through the lattice at the bush of southernwood.

It was a fine evening in May.

"Shall we go for a walk on the moors, Gerry?" asked John Stearne.

But Gerry, who loved such a walk beyond everything, said he must work in the garden, for things were so dry, and did so, until he was called in at eight o'clock to take his bread and milk, and go to bed.

He slept in a little closet adjoining Mrs. Lane's chamber underneath the eaves, where he could see the building of the swallows' nest and the budding of the Noisette rose. He did not sleep very much this night, which seemed to him unusually long; and the twittering morning song of the birds in the first greyness of dawn aroused him from a troubled slumber. He rose, washed, dressed, and went downstairs.

It was his habit to make "a bit o' fire,"

as Sarah Lane called it, put on the kettle, and then go to work in his garden, so that the old woman was not disturbed by his movements, as she was used to hear him stir at that hour. But when the kettle was on, and the breakfast things set ready, Gerry, instead of gardening, put on his Sunday blouse and knickerbockers, which he had brought into the kitchen, and went and dug up his savings in the dark and dewy garden. Then he possessed himself of a copy of the Petition which was in Sarah Lane's workbox, and, taking up Prim, tried to put that calm and methodical person into a basket; "for if he sees Prim he'll feel so sorry for her to be turned out," he thought. But she, ignorant of the momentous reasons which

justified this attempt at her incarceration, spit, scratched, and became suddenly such a demon of rage, that he gave up the effort as hopeless; moreover, he heard the church clock chime a quarter to six, and remembered that the first train to London left Milltown at twelve minutes past six.

He darted into the garden, looked tenderly at his pinks and other plants, cut his best wallflowers, and five fine carnations, tied them together, with some sweet-scented geranium leaves, and slipped out past John Stearne, as that good man unlocked the great gates. Stearne thought the child was going as usual for the morning's milk. Once free, Gerry ran like a fawn through the empty streets to the railway station.

Few people were about at that hour, but at the railway, no matter the hour, there were always noise, and bustle, and distracting confusion. Gerry did not let these deter him. He went up to the ticket office and asked for a return ticket, third-class, to London. He was told that there was no third-class to the six-twelve metropolitan express.

"How much is there to pay for the second-class?" he asked, seized with fear that the price should be greater than were his means.

"Nine shillings and fourpence," replied the clerk at the wicket. "Look sharp."

Gerry pulled out all his money. Some of it dropped down and was lost, but enough remained. He got his ticket; a good-natured woman picked up and

restored to him two of his sixpences. Pushed about, bewildered and deafened, he ran along the platform, and was hoisted by a porter into one of the carriages of the waiting train. He was only just in time. In another moment the engine screamed, the steam roared, and the London express swung out of the station.

Then Gerry realized what he had done.

"Oh, poor, poor granny!" he said piteously; "whatever will she do? Whatever will she think? I ought to have left a word!"

But it was too late to do so now. The train rushed on apace, and the flying country and the white clouds of steam blinded him; he shrank into his

corner by the door and shut his eyes; he had covered his flowers with his handkerchief. Some people opposite looked at him with goodwill and smiled. He looked so fair, and small, and trustful of his fate.

The long black snake of a train shot through the level country. It only stopped once to take in water, and it was still early in the morning when it reached King's Cross. In the murk, and roar, and confusion of the London terminus, Gerry felt for a moment as if he should drop down dead on the stones. But he resisted his panic manfully, and tried not to be afraid.

A great sob rose in his throat; he had never before been away from granny and the garden. But everything, he knew,

depended upon him. He controlled his agony of fright, and followed the crowd out of the station; he kept fast hold of his flowers.

"Please, where does the Prime Minister live?" he asked of a policeman.

"Don't cheek me, you brat!" said the constable wrathfully.

Gerry addressed his question to a crossing-sweep.

"Top o' Victoria Tower," said the sweeper; and Gerry saw that the people round were laughing at him.

The great number of the crowds, the din of the traffic, the hurry and scurry and pandemonium of noise, made him feel very sick, and he had eaten nothing at all, and his legs felt as if they were giving way under him. He approached

a cabman. "Please, where does the Prime Minister live?"

The cabman grinned. "Air ye goin' to breakfast with 'im?"

"I am going to see him," said Gerry, seriously.

"Well, git in if ye'll pay me fust," said the man, and opened the door of his vehicle, holding out his hand. Gerry showed his half-crown.

"Will that do?"

"Well, I'll make it do as ye're a little shaver," said the cabman, with an air of magnanimity.

"It's a shillin' fare," said another driver. "It's only a shillin' fare to old Tear'em's."

"Who is old Tear'em?" asked Gerry.

"Ye say ye're a'goin to see 'im,"

replied the cabmen in chorus, and they roared with laughter.

Gerry turned away and walked on; he felt so lonely and lost that he would have burst into tears if his manliness had not forced him to choke down his sobs into silence before these very rude and unkind men.

"If you tell me where the Prime Minister lives, I can walk," he said to them, but naturally no cabman cared to do this. A little crowd began to gather, and listen and laugh and jeer, nobody knew why.

"We are not rude like that in *my* town," said Gerry, his indignation burning away his fears. But he remembered the street boys who climbed up the gateway ivy, and felt that there was not very

much difference after all. A gentleman passing by looked at him with curiosity.

"What do you want with the Prime Minister? You are a country child."

"I've got to see him for Granny, and John Stearne, and everybody."

The gentleman laughed.

"I doubt your getting in, but you can try. Take the cab, if you can pay for it."

"I've half-a-crown," said Gerry; but when he felt in his pocket his half-crown was there no more, and the two sixpences were gone also.

"I had it only this minute!" he cried piteously. Every one laughed.

"Give me a bob, sir, and I'll take the boy," said the cabman who had said it was a shilling fare.

The gentleman tossed him a shilling.

"There's your fare, little shaver," he said good-naturedly. "But don't flatter yourself that you'll see Tear'em, my little man."

Gerry thanked his unknown friend, and climbed, he never knew how, into the hansom. He was very pale, and his eyes had dark shadows under them, but he kept tight hold on his flowers.

"I won't go home alive if I don't see him," he said to himself.

That he was all alone in London, without a penny, did not trouble him much. What troubled him much more was this fearful name of Tear'em, given to the great person on whom the fates of himself and his grandmother and his friends and all Dame Eleanor's Cots

depended. It was the name of a savage bulldog in one of his story books, and sent an icy chill through his veins as the cab raced on through the noisy streets, shaking him to and fro on its cushions. But he was not daunted, or dissuaded from his purpose; everything depended on him; John Stearne said the Prime Minister could save them. See the Prime Minister he would, or they should take him home dead; then granny would know he had done all he could, and would forgive him for having run away.

"I hope the kettle didn't boil over," he thought, as the hansom rattled along. A kettle left all to itself on the fire was very likely to do so, and perhaps it might have scalded poor Prim. "And if

I don't get back early," he thought also, "who'll water the stocks? And the lilies, they want such a lot."

The hansom was just then pulled up, with the usual cruel jerk, and the poor horse thrown on his haunches.

"Here you are," said the driver, and made Gerry descend. They were in front of a grand, gloomy mansion with a pillared portico, and a barouche with a pair of roans waiting before the doorway. There were some detectives in plain clothes in the street watching the house.

Gerry rang the bell.

The stately functionary who opened the door looked at him superciliously in silence.

"Can I see the Prime Minister?" asked Gerry?

The door was shut in his face. He waited outside.

"They must open again some time," he thought.

The bell was, indeed, rung several times by other persons, who received various answers from the doorkeeper; but Gerry got none. At last, exasperated, the man said to him:

"Take yourself off, my lad, or I shall send for a policeman."

Gerry said patiently, "I want to see the Prime Minister."

He had edged himself on to the doorstep; the pale London sunrays shone through the colonnade of the entrance on to his little figure; he could see into the dark hall, where several servants stood, and on to the

wide staircase with its oak balustrades and tapestries.

A gentleman was coming down the stairs, a powerfully built form bowed by age and by the burden of power. Gerry took off his hat, and before the outraged footmen could stop him, said:

"Please, sir, are you the Prime Minister?"

The great gentleman looked at him, and signed to his servants to let the audacious intruder stay where he was. The small form, the sunlit curls, the childish voice, recalled a little boy—his son—dead of fever long, long before, at seven years of age.

"What do you want, little man?" he inquired as he came down across the hall.

Gerry, emboldened, came nearer.

"I want to speak to you."

The gentleman smiled; his colleagues did not address him so very unceremoniously. The scandalized servants anxiously awaited the order to collar the imp and deliver him to the police; but Gerry came nearer still.

"John Stearne said, 'It's only the Prime Minister as can do it.' And John Stearne he knows everything, so I came."

The statesman was amused. As fortune kindly disposed it, he was merely going for his eleven o'clock drive in the Park, and he had a few minutes at his disposal.

A sorely troubled functionary endeavoured to interfere, but the Minister made no answer; he opened a door on his right,

and signed to the little boy to pass into the room beyond. Gerry, triumphant, entered the study, which was book-lined, solemn, and dark; he was too entirely absorbed in his mission to feel either hesitation or timidity, but his pulse beat very fast, and he felt cold and hot by turns.

"Now, what do you want?" said the great personage curtly. No doubt, he thought, the child was only sent to beg; but the small fair face touched his heart and made him think of his own dead boy—dead thirty years and more.

"John Stearne says——" began Gerry.

"Leave John Stearne alone, and speak for yourself," said the Minister.

"They're going to take all our Cots away," said Gerry; "Dame Eleanor's

Cots, they are; and pull 'em all down, and ruin my garden, and make a railway, and send us all out anywheres, and granny'll die of it, and me too, and where'll the swallows go? Prim we can take, but she'll be miserable, and they'll do it just when my new rose—and she's a White Baroness—is comin' on so beautiful, and we'll have to go and live in the streets, and they'll pull it all down, and they'll build in my garden—— "

And Gerry ceased with a sob.

"I confess that I fail to understand," said the statesman, in blandest, grandest tones. "What are these Cots? Where are they situated? Try to explain yourself."

Gerry fumbled with his hand in his

breeches pocket and drew out the petition of the pensioners to the Mayor of Milltown.

"We all paid to have this put in writin' by a man o' law, and then printed," he said, as he offered the paper.

The Premier's countenance changed; the child was only an emissary of grown-up importunates! But he deigned to cast his eyes over the petition, and gleaned its meaning with the rapidity of a highly trained intellect.

"The almshouses are to be valued, sold, and built over by the Milltown Corporation—a common case of expropriation. I cannot possibly interfere," he murmured; then he looked at Gerry again.

"They sent you here?" he asked. Gerry shook his head.

"I come all o' myself," he answered.

"They don't know — nobody knows— granny even don't know."

"Who paid your journey?"

"Me, myself. I broke my savings-box. 'Twas my own."

"You are a person of resources," said the Premier; "of energy also. How did you find your way here?"

"I asked peoples."

"Why did you come to me? This is entirely a local matter—a matter for your town."

"What's been gived to the people, shouldn't never be took away," said Gerry, falling back on his mainstay of John Stearne's wisdom.

"An axiom; an excellent axiom. But even axioms yield to exigencies. It is wholly impossible for me to interfere."

"Oh yes, you will! Oh yes, you must!" cried Gerry in a paroxysm of desperate woe. "They haven't no right to 'a—lie—enate' the property o' the poor. John Stearne says so, and a man o' law says so too, but we haven't got money to go against the Corp'ration—else we'd win, and we'd live and die in our homes. And I brought you my wallflowers and my mignonette, but they've gone bad in the train; if you put 'em in water, they'll come to themselves, and they're out o' my own garden, and I would have brought you Prim, but she scratched so——"

"I thank you greatly," said the statesman, and he took the bunch of faded flowers, with his grandest and blandest air. "They shall have all the water they require."

He smelt their lingering sweetness, and then laid them down on a table near him.

He placed the petition beside them, and stood lost in thought for a few moments. "It is a mere question of money, I imagine," he murmured; then he turned to the child.

"What is your name?"

"I'm Gerald Lane."

The Premier wrote it down on the margin of the petition.

"You live in these almshouses?"

"Yes, sir."

"With whom?"

"My granny."

"And all the pensioners are unwilling to be turned out?"

"Oh yes, oh yes!" Gerry's eyes brimmed

over, and his mouth quivered. "We'll all die of it if they drive us out, because it's our home, and we love it so, and they'll break up the grass and the gardens."

"The reasons scarcely seem strong enough to justify so high-handed an expropriation," thought the statesman as he looked again over the petition; it was, on a small scale, one of those tyrannous, meddlesome, irritant measures such as, on a large scale, his party loved, and he himself abhorred.

"Go home, my little man," he said in a kind tone. "You shall hear from me."

"You won't let 'em sell?" said Gerry, in anguish.

"I can say nothing. You will hear from me when I shall have examined the

matter. Buy something as you go home. You are tired."

He held out a sovereign as he spoke.

Gerry drew back, and did not put out his hand.

"I don't take money," he said, with a flush on his face.

"How did your savings-box fill, then?"

"I earned it, doing people's gardens."

"I respect you, my boy," said the great man; and he laid his hand on Gerry's curls with the same gesture of benediction as Sarah Lane was wont to use.

Gerry timidly and reverently touched the coat of the great man.

"When you're so very, very kind, sir," he murmured, "why do they call you 'Tear'em'?"

"I am not always kind. Far from

it," said the Premier, with an indulgent smile. "Farewell, my little friend."

Then he went into the hall.

"Soames," he said to one of his servants, "there are some flowers to be put in water on the table within; you will accompany this little boy to the station at King's Cross and see him safely into the train for Milltown. You will give him his luncheon here first."

Gerry had instinct true enough to keep him silent; he felt the cause of the Cots was gained. The great gentleman bowed to him with his finest courtesy, then wearily went to his carriage; he was grateful to the child for having made him for a few moments forget the toil and travail of power and the baseness and folly of men; he sighed as his head

dropped on his breast, and he leaned back on the cushions of his brougham.

"He won't forget," thought Gerry; "he didn't forget the flowers wanted water."

And, greatly comforted, he ate the good things they gave him with appetite, undismayed by the liveried footmen standing round; then he went with the servant Soames in a hansom cab to King's Cross.

When he reached Milltown the sun was setting behind the spire of the church, and men were preparing to drag the ink-black river in search of his body; and there was rapture beyond words at the sight of the tired little truant as he entered the almshouse garden.

Gerry took his way home, and entered the square as calmly as if he had never left it.

"You might ha' killed me and your granny!" said John Stearne. "Why didn't you tell us, and spare us all this misery?"

"You wouldn't have let me go," said Gerry; and he began to tie up his stocks in the evening air as though nothing had happened.

"You was cruel to me, Gerry," said Sarah Lane, who had not ceased to sob and laugh by turns. "You was brutal cruel to me."

"I couldn't help that," said Gerry. Who (he thought) could help hurting the seeding grass who had to mow a lawn?

"And you've actually seen *him?*" cried John Stearne, pushing his spectacles up on to his forehead.

Gerry nodded.

"And will he do anything?"

"I don't know," said Gerry.

He had grown very much in the eyes of all the dwellers in the almshouses.

He had been to London all by himself, and he had come back safe and sound. To the old folks, who had never been beyond the moors surrounding Milltown, he seemed a prodigious and most intrepid explorer.

But he was strangely and vexatiously silent to them all.

He told them nothing, but worked on in his taciturn, quiet way in his own garden or in theirs, and might never have left the Cots for any adventures that he related, or any signs of travel that he wore.

In his own heart Gerry was sorely anxious. He did not deceive himself or build any castles in the air.

He had told his trouble to the great man, but he had received no promise, nothing in return which could make him feel any surety that he had won the great man's help. He hoped, but he had only hope; and that is little more to the soul than honey to the stomach. He had done all he could, he had spent all he had, and there was nothing to do but to wait. He sat hour after hour on the base of the sundial, watching to see if a postman or a telegraph-boy passed, and turned in at the gate. Many passed, but none entered.

"You little goose, you little donkey!" said Sarah Lane. "Could you ever expect such a mighty person as that to remember the likes of us?"

Gerry flushed angrily, and bent his head over his sweet peas. He had done all he

could, and perhaps they would have to go away after all.

"Don't be so cut up, child," said his granny. "I'll take a couple of rooms in some little place on the moors, so as you'll have the air and a bit o' garden."

But then she broke down herself, and wept, for she was deeply attached to her little home, and it hurt her to think of its being pulled down, in a pother of dust, by a troop of meddlers. It hurt all the dwellers there cruelly.

The grey, cloister-like walls shut them away in safety from the pressure of an indifferent outside world, for to those who are old and poor the hurrying crowd, busy, and selfish, and vigorous, seems always unkind and alien. They were to be turned out of this familiar refuge as

bees are burned out of their hive. Few of them knew where to go. None of them could endure the thought of living in the streets. All the little community was like a flock of sheep which is being driven off a well-known tranquil pasture through a noisy town to the shambles. They were all old, they were all poor; to all this place was a harbour of refuge; they were good friends with one another, and every night and morning the chimes of St. Michael and All Angels rang them to rest and roused them to life.

Gerry had no grounds for the intense faith he placed in the great man who had been so kind to him; but in himself he thought, "I'm sure he won't forget, for he didn't forget the flowers; and he was so wonderful good to me."

But nothing was heard or done. The days and the weeks passed on, and the child grew thinner and paler, and his blue eyes larger, and his hands hot and dry. "He'll just go and fret himself to death," said John Stearne and Sarah Lane; and what could they do? for they could not struggle with fate, as dealt out to them by the mayor and the corporation.

Gerry ate nothing with any relish, and he took no more pleasure even in the garden.

"For what is the use?" he said to himself. "They'll pull it all up and tear it all down, and everything'll die."

Nothing of any direct certainty was known, for the old folks were too insignificant in the eyes of the county and town councils to be honoured with any

communication. But the local papers published many articles on the subject, and the men bought and read the journals, and gathered that the matter would be eventually decided against them, and in accord with the mayor's views, and that the compensation likely to be given to each pensioner was to be about eight or perhaps ten pounds a year, this sum being calculated on a portion of the capital which would be realized by the sale of the site. But not eight or even ten pounds per annum could console these obstinate old people for the impending loss of their homes, where they were all so snug, and so quiet, and so friendly, like rabbits in a warren where no sportsmen come.

"'Tis monstrous; that's what 'tis," said John Stearne and the community after

him; and the sexton, and the parish clerk, and the pew owner of St. Michael's and all other dwellers around the church agreed with them.

"Gerry did go and speak to the Prime Minister face to face," said Stearne for the thousandth time. "But, Lord! I told the dear child 'twouldn't be o' no use. Great men don't think o' the likes o' us."

Stearne believed in Gerry devoutly, but the other inmates began to be doubtful about Gerry's visit to London.

"Children dew love tarrydiddles," said one old man, "and they dew boast awful sometimes."

Notwithstanding the gatekeeper's indignant assertions that Gerry was incapable of straying a hair's breadth from the

truth, and that the people at the station knew that he had gone up in the London train, public opinion, as it existed in Dame Eleanor's Cots, began to turn against Gerry. "Children is mighty big liars sometimes," said the sceptical community; and he knew that he was suspected and disbelieved, and the insult cut him to the heart.

Even Mrs. Lane, though she never said so, thought he had dreamt of his visit to the statesman. It was so utterly improbable that such a great man would have received an unknown little boy. Gerry must have gone up to London, doubtless; but it might very well be that, absorbed by one idea, he had fallen asleep in the Park or somewhere, and dreamt of this incredible interview. The child, she

reflected, had brought not an atom of proof of it, and he was even unwilling to speak much about it.

As time went on, and the mayor's progressive projects grew more and more clearly defined, every one in the alms-houses was convinced that Gerry had made fools of them with his story; and he was made to feel the cold shadow of unpopularity, and to taste how sour the cream of popular favour can become. They said little, for there were Stearne and Sarah Lane always ready to take his part; but they looked askance at him, they sniggered as he passed, and they no longer begged him to do up their gardens, and nail up their creepers, though the summer heats had now passed and the autumnal winds were

blowing and making havoc amongst their plants.

Prim, too, had never forgotten or forgiven the attempt to put her into the basket; she was no longer friendly.

"If she had been a dog," he thought wistfully, "there isn't nothing she wouldn't have forgived."

His heart was very sore, and his body suffered with it.

The doctor consulted by Mrs. Lane spoke of anæmia, and prescribed cod-liver oil; but the wise old woman knew better what was the matter. "He's just frettin' hisself to death," she said as John Stearne had said it. "You know we've got to go, doctor."

"Yes, I know," said the doctor. "It seems hard; but it will be in reality

much better for you. These places are anti-hygienic, their sanitary arrangements are horrible—all this smothering greenery on the walls! — and open dust-bins! Actually open dust-bins! You will be infinitely better off in a nice little modern house with all proper appliances. All such rookeries as this ought to be swept away; they are mere incubating nests for bacilli!"

And he went away hurriedly lest microbes should descend upon him from the thatch, or arise in the air from the water-butt as he passed it.

"Why make him come here, granny?" said Gerry. "You hear the wicked, silly things he says."

"But you are ill, my dearie."

"No, I'm not."

"You fret, child, and that makes you ill. We all fret, 'tis true; but it don't do no good. We'll have to go. The powers above us will it so."

Gerry dropped down at her knees and hid his face on her apron.

"Oh, granny, he's surely forgot! I didn't think he'd forget; he seemed so good. I know he didn't promise, no he didn't promise, but I felt sure he'd help, and it's four months ago to-day."

Mrs. Lane bent over him and stroked his hair tenderly.

"Dearie, tell me, tell me true, are you sure you *did* see that great man? Are you certain sure you didn't dream it all?"

Gerry raised his head; his pale, thin, small face grew red with indignation.

"Of course I saw him! When I tell you I saw him? He would have given me a sovereign, but I wouldn't take it; and I wish now as I had taked it, 'cos if I'd brought it home with me you'd have believed, and all the others too."

His whole frame quivered with a passion of righteous indignation.

"Oh, how can you doubt me, granny? How can you? Do you think I'd ever tell a lie?"

"No, my love, no," murmured Sarah Lane, sorely disturbed. "No child o' my bringin' up ever lied. But you may have dreamed it, Gerry. It do seem, my dear, so utterly onlikely."

"I can't help that," said Gerry, drearily. "It's true. But I never said as he promised. He never—no, he

never—did promise. But he kept the flowers, and I thought he'd remember."

Mrs. Lane was greatly troubled. Gerry was ill; he was certainly ill; there was no doubt about that, and she thought his mind wandered. She felt sure now that it was all a delusion, that the child's imagination had been strained to excess, and its visions had become established as facts in his brain. She had heard of such ailments of the mind, and knew that they often defied all cure.

She sat still, stroking Gerry's hair as he leaned against her knee; his anger quieted, he had lapsed into the silent and sad meditation now so common with him, and so ominous at his age.

Across the turfed square she could see the gateway with its archway; the gates

were ajar, and John Stearne was speaking with a person who had approached from the street, and who looked like a gentleman's servant. He gave the old gatekeeper a large parcel and went away; Stearne stood as if riveted to the ground, staring and holding the parcel.

Then he came across the turf, treading on the daisies, which he had never done before in all his years; he staggered as if he were drunk, and he gasped for breath as he approached Mrs. Lane's porch. All the other inmates were already out at their doors, staring and wondering.

"Gerry! Gerry!" cried John Stearne. "Gerry! Gerry! Here's a present for you from the Prime Minister, and the man as brought it was to tell us that

we won't be sent adrift, because this here charity of Dame Eleanor's is not con-ver-ti-ble and can't never be broke up; and 'tis the great Crown lawyers as have said so."

Gerry sprang to his feet, galvanized into fresh life.

"Now you'll believe! Now you'll believe, all of you!" he shouted; and then he fainted.

When his grandmother and the gate-keeper brought him back to consciousness he was lying on his little bed, and the setting sun was shining through the lattice.

Beside him there was an open box made of maple wood; in the box was a set of gardening tools, of the size for a child's use, and on the lid of the box

was a silver plate, which was engraved with the date of his visit to London and the words: "To a Brave Little Boy."

"I said as he wouldn't forget!" he cried, his face illumined with joy and the ruddy rays of the sun.

"You'll be a great man, Gerry!" said the admiring pensioners as they crowded around him.

"I'll be a gardener," said Gerry. "But why did you think as I'd lied?"

He shook them all off and went into his garden, where the cat was sitting under the bush of southernwood. He took her up in his arms.

"What beautiful flowers I'll grow for him, Prim!" he murmured in her ear. "For he's kept our homes for us all."

Prim pardoned the insult of the basket, and allowed herself to be caressed; and a robin on the sundial sang.

THE END

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